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A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

A Comedy

by

IVAN TURGENEV

Adapted into English by
EMLYN WILLIAMS

With an Introduction by
MICHAEL REDGRAVE



HEINEMANN

LONDON



Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO
SINGAPORE AUCKLAND
IBADAN CAPE TOWN
HONG KONG

023
1.3411

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FIRST PUBLISHED 1943

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE DRAMA LIBRARY 1953

REPRINTED 1959, 1965

PUBLISHED BY
HEINEMANN EDUCATIONAL BOOKS LTD
15-16 QUEEN STREET, MAYFAIR, LONDON, W.1
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN FOR THE PUBLISHERS BY
BUTLER AND TANNER LTD, FROME AND LONDON

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THE CHARACTERS

SHAAF, Kolia's German tutor

ANNA SEMYENOVNA YSLAEVA, Natalia's mother-in-law

LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA, her companion

NATALIA PETROVNA

RAKITIN, a friend of the family

KOLIA, son of Natalia and Yslaev

BELIAEV, his new tutor

MATVEI, a manservant

IGNATY ILLYICH SHPICHELSKY, The Doctor

VERA, Natalia's ward

YSLAEV, Natalia's husband, a rich landowner

KATIA, a maid

BOLSHINTSOV, a neighbour

The action takes place on Yslaev's estate in
the country near Moscow

The time is in the early forties of the last
century

This adaptation of A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY was first presented in London on 11th February, 1943, at the St. James's Theatre, by Bronson Albery and Tennent Plays, Ltd., with the following cast :

SHAAF	Frederick Schiller
ANNA SEMYENOVNA	Annie Esmond
LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA	Winifred Hindle
NATALIA PETROVNA	Valerie Taylor
RAKITIN	Michael Redgrave
KOLIA	David Baxter
BELIAEV	Tom Gill
MATVEI	Alban Blakelock
THE DOCTOR	Ronald Squire
VERA	Isolde Denham
YSLAEV	Michael Shepley
KATIA	Jacqueline Clarke
BOLSHINTSOV	John Ruddock

Produced by EMLYN WILLIAMS

(Settings by Michael Relph Costumes by Sophia Harris

IVAN TURGENEV

1818-1883

BORN in 1818 at Orel in Russia, Turgenev was a member of the rich landowning class. He was educated by private tutors and later at the Universities of Moscow and Berlin.

He was a man of liberal views, which brought him into conflict with the repressive political regime of the day, and he was confined to live on his own estates. Later, however, he travelled abroad and settled in Baden-Baden until the Franco-Prussian war, when he moved to Paris where he remained for the rest of his life.

His reputation, built up on his fine literary work, spread throughout Europe and the United States, and whilst remaining a Russian he was thought of rather as a European.

The play *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY* was written in 1850 but was not produced until 1872.

At the end of a long and painful illness, Turgenev died in Paris in 1883. His body was taken to Russia and there interred.

INTRODUCTION

BY MICHAEL REDGRAVE

A Month in the Country has been called a novelist's play. This is true, I think, only in the sense that it is the one full-length play written by Turgenev. Certainly a quick reading of it—a glance at any one of the soliloquies even—reveals the writing to be of an extraordinarily fine, silken subtlety; it clearly calls for the kind of acting which can hint at half-tones, undertones and overtones; there are twistings and turnings of motive and character which, we might suppose, would be more at home in a fine binding than between the floats and the backdrop. It is true also that many lovers of the play say that they have never seen a truly satisfactory production of it; but that, we ruefully reflect, is true of most of our favourite plays. Then again, we may be tempted to agree with those who exclaim—some with delight, others with bored disgust—"But nothing happens!"

But does this make it the more "a novelist's play"? Does nothing happen in novels? And is it true, in point of fact, that "nothing happens" here? Indeed a very great deal happens. It is part of Turgenev the playwright's skill to prepare us for what happens in such a way that we are convinced that it seems inevitable, and to convince us that it is so at the very instant of its happening and not on reflection. The novelist may lead the reader aside, almost without him noticing it, to remind him of some point of character or plot which the reader may have let slip from his mind and which needs to be understood if some fresh development is to be made credible. A dramatist has small time for this. The construction of a play, so we are told—and it is easy to believe—is a more exacting task than the construction of a novel. Each key fact of plot or character—it seems to be an old general rule—has

to be used three times before we will accept a new turn of events from it. The surprises when they come should give us only a moment of shock. And yet with what fine theatrical daring does Turgenev use that hoariest of theatrical stock surprises, "the interrupted love scene"! Natalia and Rakitin are discovered by Anna and Yslaev, and because we know that though this might have been a "love scene" it is in fact nothing of the kind we are persuaded to accept the old trick. Rakitin then discovers Natalia and Beliaev. This time we swallow it greedily because we know that Rakitin, the supposed "lover", is now in the husband's position and knows the "love scene" to be real. That Yslaev and the Doctor should later come upon Natalia and Rakitin turns the third discovery into a hugely funny situation. We are almost expecting Yslaev and it is his voice we hear approaching. Whom we do not expect is the Doctor, the only character who more or less knows the truth. These moments, together with the great scenes, such as the one where Natalia lays bare Vera's heart; the scenes where Rakitin and Natalia—she needing his help and he ready to give it—turn against each other; the Doctor's courtship of Lizaveta; Vera's challenge to Natalia; the parting scene of Yslaev and Rakitin and the whole glorious, gay and yet autumnal ending—these could only have been written by a playwright.

At the core of this play is the gold of pure theatre. "Theatre" is a term so debased that it has come to mean almost the same as the adjective theatrical, which lost value long ago. By "theatre" I mean that essential quality which belongs to every play, every production, every performance. Just as music means music and not melody and orchestration; as painting means painting and not composition, sensuousness of the palette or richness of the paint; so theatre, pure theatre, is at the core of every great play. It is the great preservative against time and climate.

Such a play can survive even rough handling. We might

even wonder—apart from difficulties of staging, to which I will refer later—why amateurs and repertory companies do not revive *A Month in the Country*, for it has a wealth of good acting parts. One answer is not hard to find: the role of Natalia Petrovna needs a virtuoso actress.

The essence of the play is, I am persuaded, comic and anti-romantic. The actress who plays Natalia romantically will not always find it possible to check laughs at the character's expense, though if she is skilful and if the play is directed romantically, most of these will be suppressed. The romantic actress will try to check them, but the laughs are intended. Natalia is capable of being not only entrancing but exasperating and the balance has to be kept with a flair, a virtuosity. The actress must have a deep sympathy for her faults and failings; discretion is not enough. In Turgenev's cast-list we notice that Natalia is 29, Rakitin 30. This is important only in that it indicates that the story is not of an ageing woman suffering from the bitterest of the pains of love: the humiliation of a desperate last fling. She herself may feel it to be her last. We should know from the look of her that it is not. When she says, of herself and Rakitin, "We old people", we should smile at her childish cruelty, and it should not be the wry smile we would give two lovers in their forties. Having stated that, let me be contradictory and say that I cannot imagine Natalia Petrovna being truly played by an actress who is not in her thirties and that the ideal actress should be at least forty-five and look not a day over thirty.

Rakitin is often considered a poor part; "a walking gentleman", as James Agate once called him. It is certainly a difficult part, as I know from the two productions in which I have tried to play him. For a great deal of the play he is a mirror to Natalia. Even his soliloquies—opportunities in most plays for the actor to come to grips with the audience—present a rare hazard, for on each occasion the audience is a jump ahead of him. He is intelligent, but over-subtle, and his subtleties make him seem a

plodder. If, at any performance, Rakitin has not persuaded the audience to laugh at his discomfiture during his second appearance in the garden, the first soliloquy which follows seems dangerously self-piteous and tedious. In spite of what the Doctor says of him, he is a man of some passion, as we learn in the last act from his scene with the tutor, but for nine-tenths of the play the passion is kept under such icy control that—especially to English audiences who are inclined to believe that a man of subtle intellect is a man without deep feelings—the passion may not appear to be there. I think the actor may be said to have succeeded if he can make us see why he should choose, as Stanislavski chose, this hazardous “star” part rather than the much more rewarding role of the Doctor.

The Doctor presents no difficulties to any experienced character-comedian, and it is one of Emlyn Williams’ successes in this adaptation that he has given the Doctor’s lines the full bite and tang which they surely have in the original Russian. The Doctor is an acting “plum”, one of those parts in which it is virtually impossible to fail. But for the balance of the play as well as for the credibility of a few of his lines the actor who plays him has to be able to suggest a man of peasant stock.

Vera is rewarding but also presents one major problem. Any good young actress can play Vera in the first three acts (the play is in five—here adapted into two) but by the end of the fourth act when Vera cries out “I’m your rival”, acting of a higher order than the good is needed. The girl must become a woman before our eyes. (Another stroke of pure theatre.) The difficulty of the part can best be suggested by the remark of Michel St. Denis, when directing this moment of the play in the 1950 revival at the Old Vic: “I cannot help you here. I can only say that whatever it is you do it must be *brilliant*.”

Vera is perhaps the only character on whom Turgenev does not at some time throw the light of affectionate ridicule, and even with her we feel that her cold, unbend-

ing attitude towards Natalia in the last act has a touch of self-dramatization.

This light is thrown rather more strongly on the most attractive of all the characters, the tutor. In his scene with Rakitin in the garden, Beliaev's sense of inferiority makes him boastful, as a child can sometimes be boastful with grown-ups. His reference to poetry as "affected", for instance, is received tolerantly by the audience as well as by the older man. But when in the last act he appears dressed-up and with a flower in his button-hole his tone should to some extent make him deserve Rakitin's crushing lecture.

An essential thing about the casting of Beliaev is his appearance. If Rakitin is the mirror to Natalia's heart—and a rather clouded mirror—the young tutor is the bright morning sun. To his rays all the young women respond like flower petals—the budding Vera, the dewy Katia and Natalia, the rose in bloom—and he is as unconscious of all this as the sun itself. The unconsciousness lends him a touch of divinity. I first saw this play when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge where Amner Hall gave us two rich seasons of weekly repertory at the Festival Theatre there.* In every particular the young Robert Donat, who played Beliaev, seemed to answer Natalia's description. You felt he was just the sort of fellow who would teach Kolia to climb trees and swim on his back. There was just that look in the eye, direct and lively, piercing a certain shyness in the face. His strongly-built body had a clumsy peasant grace. He could have entered any household in Europe with similarly disturbing results.

The rest of the characters are from stock and need only good type casting. But it is valuable that the different social strata should be marked. Yslaev, for instance, is a gentleman as well as a rich landowner. Except in intelli-

* It was Amner Hall who gave us the first English production of the play at the Royalty Theatre, 5th July, 1926, with Gillian Scaife an admirable Natalia.

gence and looks, he is Rakitin's equal. Bolshintsov could be played in a variety of ways but for *optique du Théâtre* should be gross in manner as well as appearance. Katia and Matvei are not the elegant domestics of the French drama. They are country people. Katia, likely enough, may be from the same model as the housemaid Klavdia in Turgenev's *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*: "There, too, I saw for the first time, among the ripe raspberry bushes, the housemaid Klavdia, who, in spite of her turned-up nose and habit of giggling in her kerchief, aroused such a tender passion in me that I could hardly breathe, and stood faint and tongue-tied in her presence; and once at Easter, when it came to her turn to kiss my seignorial hand, I almost flung myself at her feet to kiss her down-trodden goat-skin slippers."

In that memorable production at Cambridge the part of Katia was played by a Russian, the wife of Boris Ranevsky, the excellent Rakitin. She had a plump, slumberous look, which was quite delicious. Though she seemed only half-awake, the one thought which was uppermost in her mind conveyed itself very vividly to the audience. When she offered Beliaev raspberries they became the apple in the garden of Eden. This again was of immense help to the sexual atmosphere of the play.

Though it is true that every play has its own atmosphere, which the producer who is respectful to the author should seek to discover, it is also true that the greatest plays have a hardiness that will survive much change of climate. This play, it seems to me, would have equal success if it turned up as an undiscovered nineteenth-century masterpiece by some French or Italian or English author.* This is not to say that no attempt should be made to capture something of the Russian atmosphere but simply that the locale here is not as all-important as in, say, *The Cherry Orchard*.

* Was not Turgenev's model for the heroine Madame Viardot? and did not his compatriots say of him: "To dine with Turgenev is to dine with Europe"?

INTRODUCTION

The plays of Chekov have made us perhaps a little self-conscious, not to say snobbish, in our appreciation of that internationally famous vintage-export, the Russian temperament.

For instance, Act 4 (here Act II, Scene II) is really set in a sort of deserted Garden-house, which Turgenev makes the rendezvous of Vera and Beliaev and where later the last two "interrupted love-scenes" take place. The Garden-house *is*, perhaps, a more likely meeting-place than the garden, which we have seen to be a fairly busy spot, but the garden, bathed in a late-afternoon twilight, becomes a perfectly acceptable setting for secret meetings.

This version of the play is a fairly free adaptation, but a remarkably successful one. If the romantic aspect is perhaps overstressed, the ironic element is by no means eliminated. Many of Natalia's difficulties have been smoothed over and the part is much more manageable than in the more literal translations. Indeed, the whole play is more manageable, due mainly to the excellence of Mr. Williams' dialogue. A close comparison of the adaptation with the original is a good exercise for any producer or lover of the play. The original is of enormous length and the Moscow Art Theatre made extensive cuts. Mr. Williams' text, based on a literal translation by Miss Elisaveta Fenn, derives from the Moscow production and makes further cuts to fit the working proportions of the modern theatre. Of course, in the process, some delightful little touches are not so much lost as jettisoned, for the sake of buoyancy. It floats, like a bright soap-bubble over a summer garden.



ACT I

SCENE I

While the curtain is still down VERA is heard playing at the piano-forte in the ballroom : a mazurka of Chopin. A pause. THE CURTAIN RISES slowly.

The drawing-room of YSLAEV's house on his estate in the country near Moscow, Russia ; a summer afternoon. An almost triangular view of the room, with in the left wall ('left' and 'right' throughout refer to the audience's left and right) large French window opening on to the garden, and in the right wall (up a step and beyond pillars) folding doors (opening onstage) leading to the ballroom ; a smaller window to the left of them ; to the right of them, an entrance leading off right, presumably to the hall, the dining-room, and the stairs ; to the right again, this side of the pillars and nearer the audience, a smaller door leading to the study. The room is beautifully furnished, the native Russian merging into great elegance of detail (markedly French in influence), revealing the taste of a well-bred young hostess. On the left, between the windows and the audience, a desk and desk-chair ; a table ; in the angle between the French windows and the pillars, a tall ornamented Russian stove ; an armchair ; a Récamier sofa ; a footstool ; a long stool ; a mirror over the desk.

It is a beautiful summer afternoon, in the early forties of the last century.

At the table are seated ANNA SEMYENOVNA YSLAEVA (Yslaev's mother), a fussy old lady who is used to her own way : LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA (her companion), thirty-seven, whose looks have long ago grown shabby through an incessant anxious desire to please her betters : and SHAAF, a middle-aged German tutor, ugly, slow and stupid. They are playing preference. At some distance from them are NATALIA and RAKITIN. She is a beautiful exquisite creature of twenty-nine, elegantly posed on the sofa ; he is a fine-looking thoughtful man, of great breeding, a year or two older. He sits on the footstool, almost at her feet,

a book open on his knees, looking at her ; she has laid down her embroidery and is fanning herself.

A pause ; the music begins again. For a space of time after the curtain rises, the only movement is the fingers of the card-players and the flutter of NATALIA'S fan, as she listens to the music. The music comes to an end. A pause.

SHAAF : Har-r-tz.

ANNA : Hearts again ? If this goes on, my friend, you'll have the clothes off our backs——

SHAAF (*phlegmatically*) : Eight har-r-tz.

ANNA (*to LIZAVETA*) : Did you ever know such a madcap ? I declare, there's no playing with him——

LIZAVETA (*smiling and nodding*) : None at all . . . (*Sniffing from a box.*) So true——

ANNA : And you stop taking snuff, I've told you how bad it is for you.

LIZAVETA : Just this once . . .

A pause.

NATALIA (*to RAKITIN*) : Why have you stopped reading ?

RAKITIN (*reading*) : ' Monte-Cristo se redressa haletant ' . . . (*Looking up at her.*) Are you interested ?

NATALIA : No.

RAKITIN : Then why ask me to plough through——

NATALIA : It's perfectly simple why. The other day a woman said to me ' Have you read *Monte-Cristo*—my dear, you must, it's captivating!' I didn't say a word at the time, but now I shall be able to tell her I *have* read it, and that it isn't captivating at all. Do go on.

RAKITIN (*looking for his place in the book*) : ' Se redressa haletant, et——'

NATALIA : Have you seen Arkady today ?

RAKITIN : Yes, ran into him working by the dam.

NATALIA : Was ever a woman blessed with such a pillar of industry for a husband ?

RAKITIN : He wanted to explain something to the workmen, and walked into the sand right up to his knees.

NATALIA : How like him. . . . He attacks everything with too much enthusiasm—he tries too hard. And I consider that a fault. Don't you agree ?

RAKITIN : Yes, I do.

NATALIA : Oh, how boring of you. . . . You always agree with me. Read me more.

SHAAP (*as RAKITIN turns over pages*) : Har-r-tz.

ANNA : What, again ? Really, Shaaf, this is not to be borne ! (*To NATALIA.*) Daughter-in-law, do you know what—daughter-in-law !

NATALIA (*paying attention with difficulty*) : Yes ?

ANNA : What do you think, dear, our Prussian friend's beating us with the most monstrous tactics——

SHAAP : Und now aggin zeven har-r-tz. (*He has a strong German accent.*)

ANNA (*rising and gathering up the cards*) : We're changing over to whist. . . . (*To NATALIA.*) But where's our little treasure ?

NATALIA : Kolia ? Gone for a walk with his new tutor.

ANNA : Ah . . . Now whist—(*smartly flicking cards*)—Lizaveta Bogdanovna, you're my partner——

LIZAVETA : Oh, do you mean it—an honour——

RAKITIN (*to NATALIA*) : Did you say something about a new tutor ?

NATALIA : We acquired one while you were away, for general knowledge.

RAKITIN : Another old fogey ?

NATALIA : No. . . . My dear, I tell you what—you know how you love watching people, probing like a dentist into their innermost thoughts——

RAKITIN : Oh come——

NATALIA : I want you to focus your attention on him.

RAKITIN : The new tutor ? Why ?

NATALIA : Because I like him.

RAKITIN : Describe him to me.

NATALIA : Oh . . . well. Tall. Fair. Very young . . .

RAKITIN : Yes ?

NATALIA : Very good eyes, that look straight at you, with an expression of great liveliness.

RAKITIN : Yes ?

NATALIA : The whole face bears a marked air of vigour—something——

RAKITIN : Go on.

NATALIA : Something—forceful . . . but you'll see for yourself. There's one thing, though—his manner's a trifle gauche, and that's a grave defect in the eyes of a man of the world like you.

RAKITIN : I'm not in your good books today, I can see that——

NATALIA : Seriously, Rakitin, do have a look at him, it's my opinion he has the makings of a fine man. Though Heaven knows, it's early to say——

RAKITIN : You have whetted my curiosity.

NATALIA : I'm so glad. . . . Shall we read ?

RAKITIN (*reading*) : 'Se redressa haletant, et——'

NATALIA : But where's Vera ? I haven't set eyes on her since this morning. . . . (*As RAKITIN shuts his book.*) Ah . . . Tell me some news.

RAKITIN : What do you wish to hear ? About my visit to the Krinitsins ?

NATALIA : If you like. How are our newly-weds ?

RAKITIN : Time lies heavy on their hands.

NATALIA : Already ? Jamais ! But how did you find out ?

RAKITIN : Can one conceal boredom ? Everything else, but boredom . . . no.

NATALIA (*looking at him*) : Can one conceal—everything else ?

RAKITIN : I think so.

A pause. She looks away.

NATALIA : What did you do there ?

RAKITIN : Nothing ; I was bored too, and to be bored by one's friends is a calamity. One feels at ease and relaxed, one breathes an air of affection . . . and one is bored. To extinction. The heart aches stupidly, as if it were hungry.

NATALIA : A clever man like you must often find the world very dull——

RAKITIN (*quietly, with meaning*) : You're talking as if you had no idea what it felt like to live with a creature whom you love and who bores you.

NATALIA : 'Love' is a big word. . . . You're a subtle creature, Rakitin, aren't you?

RAKITIN : Am I?

NATALIA : Over-subtle, in fact; it's your Achilles heel. You're as clever as a cartload of old professors. Sometimes, when you and I are talking, I feel we're just . . . making lace.

RAKITIN : Lace?

NATALIA : Have you ever watched women making lace? They sit in stuffy rooms, and never move an inch to the left or to the right. Lace is a lovely thing, but on a hot day I'd sooner have a drink of icy fresh water.

RAKITIN : Natalia Petrovna, you're annoyed with me.

NATALIA : Am I?

RAKITIN : I don't know quite why, but you are.

NATALIA : When men pride themselves on their subtlety, they have even less insight than when they don't. . . . No, I'm not annoyed with you——

ANNA : At last! He's over-reached himself—(*rising*)—played right into our hands! The rascal's over-reached himself! My luck's turned, where's my purse—— (*She crosses and rummages in the desk.*)

SHAAP (*sulkily*) : It iss de fault von Lizaveta Bogdanovna.

LIZAVETA (*annoyed*) : Oh, I protest! How was I to know that Anna Semyenovna had no hearts?

During this, RAKITIN rises, walks, then turns and surveys

NATALIA.

SHAAP : In de future, vid Lizaveta Bogdanovna as my partner, I do not play. (*He counts his winnings and writes figures in a pocket-book.*)

LIZAVETA : That suits me to a T, Herr Shaaf. . . . Well, upon my word!

ANNA (*calling*): Shuffle the cards, Lizaveta Bogdanovna, and stop airing your views!

RAKITIN (*to NATALIA*): The more I look at you today, the less I recognize you. You've changed, in some way——

NATALIA: Really? How interesting.

KOLIA *runs in from the garden, and hurries to ANNA SEMYENOVNA. He is an attractive child of ten.*

KOLIA: Granny! Granny! (*Covering her eyes with one hand.*) Guess what I've got!

ANNA: Now let me think—what can Granny's little treasure have for Granny! . . . (*As KOLIA uncovers her eyes and brings out a bow and arrows from behind his back.*) Oh, what a lovely toy! Now who made this for you?

KOLIA (*pointing to the garden*): He did!

RAKITIN *turns. BELIAEV appears shyly at the windows. He is a slight personable youth of twenty-one, carefully but shabbily dressed; at the moment he is particularly coltish and self-conscious, but once he is at ease with people of his own age, all that breaks down and he becomes a high-spirited impressionable student. He carries books.*

ANNA: Really, it's beautifully put together—(*rising and going back to the others*)—and now to work——

KOLIA: D'you know what, Granny? I shot with it, twice, Granny, twice! I aimed at a tree, Granny, and I hit it! Both times, Granny! Both times——

NATALIA: Show me, Kolia.

KOLIA (*running to her and giving her the bow to examine*): Oh, Mamma, you should see the way he climbs trees, better than a squirrel—and he wants to teach me the way to, *and* he wants to teach me how to swim on my back. . . . He's going to teach me everything there is, everything in the world, Mamma!

NATALIA (*to BELIAEV*): It's so very kind of you to take such pains with him. I'm extremely obliged.

BELIAEV *bows to her.*

KOLIA (*running to BELIAEV*): Let's run as far as the stables, Alexei Nikolaich, shall we? And take some bread for Favourite!

BELIAEV : Shall we ? That's a good idea——

ANNA (*as KOLIA runs out by the windows*) : Come and give Granny a kiss first, darling——

KOLIA (*in the garden*) : Later, Granny, later——

BELIAEV *smiles sheepishly at RAKITIN and NATALIA and follows KOLIA into the garden.*

ANNA : What a little pet that child is, what a charmer ! . . .
(*To SHAAF and LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA, insistently.*) Don't you agree ?

LIZAVETA : An angel, no more no less——

SHAAF : Boodiful, boodiful——pass.

NATALIA (*to RAKITIN*) : Well, what did you think of him ?

RAKITIN : Think of whom ?

NATALIA : Why, the new tutor ! You are provoking——

RAKITIN : Let me see, his eyes——yes, it's a good face. He seems very shy, doesn't he ?

NATALIA : I tell you what, Rakitin ! Let's make a hobby of him !

RAKITIN : How do you mean ?

NATALIA : Complete his education ! It's a unique chance for sedate, sensible people like us to exercise our virtues. You and I are eminently sensible, are we not ?

RAKITIN : You find this boy interesting ? He'd be flattered if he knew.

NATALIA : Ah, would he ? I'm afraid, my dear, just because you and I study ourselves with the greatest industry, we bask in the belief that we know all about everybody else. But he isn't like us, not the least little bit.

RAKITIN : You're perfectly right. The soul of another man is a dark forest. . . .

NATALIA (*ironically*) : So true, so true. . . .

RAKITIN : Why are you continually mocking me ?

NATALIA : If one can't tease one's friends, whom can one tease ? And you're my friend. (*Pressing his hand.*) My old friend. As if you didn't know——*ce que vous êtes pour moi.*

RAKITIN : Natalia Petrovna, you play with me like a cat with a mouse !

NATALIA: Oh, do I?

ANNA: That means I've won twenty from you, Adam Ivanych—things are on the mend!

SHAAF: In de future, vid Lizaveta Bogdanovna as my partner, I do not play.

MATVEI *enters from the ballroom. He is a manservant, about forty.*

MATVEI (*announcing*): Ignaty Illyich Shpighelsky!

DOCTOR SHPIGHELSKY *follows on his heels. He is a big, attractive florid man, with tremendous personality; behind his social manner (in which breezy exuberance alternates with portentous solemnity, the manner of a born comedian) he hides a sly watchful and sardonic nature. It is clear from everybody's reaction to him that he is accepted as a great wag.*

THE DOCTOR: Stuff and nonsense, man, you don't announce a doctor, it'll be the undertaker next! (*As ANNA laughs, and MATVEI goes back, closing the doors, stifling a smile.*) My undying regards to one and all, and all and one! (*Kissing ANNA's hand.*) And how is our charming duenna? Making her fortune?

ANNA: Fortune, the idea—

THE DOCTOR: The season's greetings to Natalia Petrovna, and ditto—(*to RAKITIN*)—to Mihail Alexandrovitch!

NATALIA: How are you, Doctor, are you well?

THE DOCTOR: 'How are you, Doctor, are you well'—now what a question, I ask you! What else can a physician do, but burst with health? No doctor worth his salt ever gets ill—he just dies. (*Taking snuff.*)

NATALIA: Do sit down. . . .

THE DOCTOR (*sitting in the armchair*): And what of *your* health, good lady?

NATALIA: Sound enough, Doctor, but I'm in a bad mood today. And that's a kind of disorder, isn't it?

THE DOCTOR (*rising*): Ah me, ah me, lackaday. . . . (*With mock seriousness, feeling her pulse.*) Do you know what's the matter with you, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA: No, what?

THE DOCTOR: Too serious-minded.

NATALIA (*rapping him with her fan*): Oh!

THE DOCTOR: There's nothing like a good laugh for bustling up the circulation. (*Sitting again.*) Though a couple of my special pink drops won't do you any harm.

NATALIA: But I'm more than willing to laugh. Now, Doctor, you've a tongue like a rapier—which is what I like and respect you for—tell me something amusing—vite!

THE DOCTOR: At your service, peerless lady. Though I wasn't prepared to be held up for jokes at the point of a pistol—blindfold but unbowed, I walk the plank. . . .

RAKITIN (*sitting on the footstool*): Ah. . . .

THE DOCTOR: You know Verenitsin Platon-Vassilevitch?

NATALIA: I know whom you mean, yes——

THE DOCTOR: Well, he has a mad sister. 'Smatter o' fact, they're so dead alike that if she's mad he must be too, and if he's sane then she's no lunatic, but that's neither here nor there; all we know is that over every man jack of us there hovers the inscrutable—if rather grubby—finger of Fate; only the other day, with my own fair hands, I poured a basin of cold water over the lady, and when she was dried she was madder than ever—but still . . . Her brother has a daughter, a greeny-coloured wench with pale little eyes, a red little nose and the chance of inheriting three hundred serfs from Auntie, which makes her perfect. Lunatics live for ever, so Auntie looks like being with us for quite a time, but one hopes for the best—anyway Papa claps her on the market, and various eligibles bob up: among them a certain Perekusov, thin as a rake and shy as a rabbit, but the highest principles. Papa fancies him, Miss fancies him, slap the young codger on the back, prod him in the belly, and publish the banns. . . . But wait! Scene, the Grand Marshal's Ball, gaiety at its height; hey presto, jack-in-the-box-out-of-the-blue, Ardalion Protobekassov . . . (*clicking his heels*) . . . an officer!

NATALIA: Ahh . . .

THE DOCTOR: 'Mademoiselle, may I have the honour . . .'
(*clicking his heels.*) One polka. Two more polkas. (*Clicking his heels, smartly, twice.*) Then we sit out, the military eyes start

rolling like drums, and mademoiselle's head is turned as neat as a water-tap, swish. . . . Tears, moans, breathe the word 'wedding' and she goes into a series of elegant fits. 'Bless my soul,' thinks Papa, 'well, if she wants the officer, I'll prove I'm her great-hearted father, anyway *he's* got money too.' So in the twinkling of a bed-post the officer is invited, does a pinch of courting, offers hand and heart. And then . . . what?

NATALIA: Happy ever after?

THE DOCTOR: That's what *you* think. Tears and fits again, a terrible rumpus. This time Papa's completely at sea. 'Now look here, my girl, which of 'em *do* you want?' And what d'you think her answer is?

RAKITIN: What?

THE DOCTOR: 'Papa, I've no idea . . . and yet my distress is profound. I am a woman who loves two men at the same time.'

An awkward pause. He studies his finger-nails. RAKITIN rises slowly.

And there we are, that's the sort of thing goes on in these parts.

NATALIA (*as he takes snuff*): I don't find it so staggering. Cannot one love two people at once?

RAKITIN: You think so?

NATALIA (*catching his eye, then rising and walking slowly to the windows*): I don't know, though—perhaps it proves you don't really love either.

THE DOCTOR (*catching her eye*): Exactly—hit the nail on the head.

ANNA (*rising*): My legs have gone to sleep, but I've got my money back. . . . Ah! (*To SHAAF.*) You owe me seventy copecks, I'm going to do the fleecing for a change. . . . (*Walking towards the hall.*) Forty winks before tea, that game's killed me—worth it, though—quick march, Liza, don't dawdle—

LIZAVETA (*rising, and scrabbling about on the card table*): Coming—I'm filling your reticule—

ANNA: My legs, my legs. . . .

She goes out into the hall. NATALIA comes down, sits at the

desk, takes up a brush, and makes idle strokes on a watercolour propped on the desk.

THE DOCTOR: Lizaveta Bogdanovna, snuff?

LIZAVETA (*simpering*): I oughtn't to . . .

THE DOCTOR: Come, give that devil in you a chance!

LIZAVETA: Oh, Doctor . . .

ANNA'S VOICE (*in the hall, as LIZAVETA takes a pinch*): Liza!

LIZAVETA (*calling*): Coming!

She sneezes, and hurries into the hall. SHAAF collects the cards.

THE DOCTOR (*to RAKITIN, quietly*): So you've no idea what is the matter with her today?

RAKITIN: Not the faintest.

THE DOCTOR: Well, if you don't know . . .

RAKITIN meets his eyes, goes up humming, and plays an idle game of patience; SHAAF is still writing in his pocket-book.

THE DOCTOR *clears his throat and crosses to NATALIA.*

THE DOCTOR (*with false bonhomie*): Er—Natalia Petrovna! I have a little matter of business to go into with you . . .

NATALIA (*painting*): Business? Monsieur le Diplomate, you make me quite nervous!

THE DOCTOR: Actually, it's to do with a third party. A crony of mine.

NATALIA: Do I know him?

THE DOCTOR: You do indeed! He is no less than your neighbour.

NATALIA (*still painting*): Old Bolshintsov? Yes?

THE DOCTOR: He has asked me to find out what your plans are for your ward.

NATALIA turns and stares at him.

NATALIA: For Vera Alexandrovna?

THE DOCTOR: Not to put too fine a point, this crony of mine—

NATALIA: You don't mean to say he wants to marry her?

THE DOCTOR: The whole thing in a nutshell.

NATALIA: You're being facetious, aren't you?

THE DOCTOR: I'm not, for a change.

NATALIA: But my dear man, she's a child! (*Laughing.*)
What a fantastic errand!

THE DOCTOR: Oh, I don't see why—my friend—

NATALIA: Of course one mustn't forget that almost before
you're a doctor, you're a business man—

THE DOCTOR (*jovially*): You slander me, dear lady—

NATALIA: Who is this *friend* of yours, Monsieur le Diplo-
mate?

THE DOCTOR: Excuse me, you haven't given me any
indication—

NATALIA: But really, Doctor, I've told you, she's a child—

VERA and KOLIA run in from the garden, from the left of
the windows; VERA is a beautiful immature girl of seventeen,
timid and highly strung.

KOLIA (*running to RAKITIN*): Could we have some glue, do
you think? Could we have some glue?

RAKITIN (*to KOLIA*): And what d'you want with glue,
suddenly?

VERA *curtseys breathlessly to THE DOCTOR, and sits.*

KOLIA: Oh, it's necessary, sir, absolutely essential—what
d'you think my new tutor's making for me? A kite—so we
must have some glue, mustn't we—may we?

RAKITIN (*about to ring the bell*): In a twinkling—

SHAAF: Erlauben Sie . . . Monsieur Kolia has not his
Cherman lesson today prepared. (*Taking KOLIA's hand.*)
Kommen Sie—

KOLIA (*imploring*): Tomorrow—morgen, morgen—
(*Struggling.*) No, Herr Shaaf—please—

NATALIA: Kolia!

RAKITIN (*to NATALIA*): It's rather a shame, they're making
a kite, and he's being kidnapped for a German lesson—

SHAAF (*with dignity*): Gnädige Frau—

NATALIA (*severely, to KOLIA*): Kolia, you've had quite
enough tearing around for one day—

KOLIA: But, maman—

NATALIA: Do you hear me?

KOLIA (*whispering, to RAKITIN*): Try and get us some glue,

sir, will you, please? Cross my heart, sir? Please?

SHAAF: Kommen Sie—yonk vicked man—yonk vicked man——

He pilots KOLIA into the ballroom. RAKITIN follows them.

VERA rises and walks.

NATALIA (*seeing her*): Vera my dear, how flushed you are! I haven't seen you since this morning. What have you been doing all this time?

VERA: I've been with the new tutor.

NATALIA (*after a pause, looking at her*): Really?

VERA: Oh, and Kolia . . .

NATALIA: Sit down, dear, you must be worn out.

THE DOCTOR (*as VERA obeys*): But running about is good for one, at that age.

NATALIA: Oh . . . Ah well, Doctor, you know best. . . .
(*To VERA.*) Tell me what you did in the garden.

She crosses and sits in the armchair. THE DOCTOR watches them.

VERA: We played games, then he climbed a tree——

NATALIA: Kolia? Never——

VERA: No no, the—new tutor. He was chasing a squirrel and he climbed up and up, till he could shake the top—we felt quite frightened—then he made a bow-and-arrow for Kolia, —then he betted me that I couldn't play a mazurka, and I won, then we ran out again, and then—oh, I don't think I ought to tell you——

NATALIA: But I insist——

VERA: He crept up to one of your cows, made one leap, and landed on her back. She was so surprised she jumped five feet and spun round like a mad old top, and he laughed so much he fell off, and we laughed till we cried, then he said he'd make a kite, and that's why we came in.

NATALIA (*patting her cheek*): What a child. . . . Don't you agree, Doctor?

THE DOCTOR: But I don't think it matters. On the contrary.

NATALIA: Don't you?

VERA looks at her, puzzled and disconcerted.

THE DOCTOR: Bother—I've suddenly remembered—your coachman's on the sick list, and I haven't looked at him yet—*(going)*—pray excuse me——

NATALIA: He looks as fit as a fiddle to me, rosy cheeks——

THE DOCTOR: Fever, dear lady, can be very deceptive.

He goes out into the hall as RAKITIN returns from the ballroom.

NATALIA *(rising, to VERA)*: Mon enfant, vous feriez bien de mettre une autre robe pour dîner.

VERA *(stammering)*: What—*(rising)*—oh . . .

NATALIA *(suddenly, as VERA makes to go to the hall)*: Come here.

VERA obeys; NATALIA kisses her on the brow.
What a child!

VERA smiles awkwardly, kisses her hand, and starts to go.

RAKITIN *(whispering to her)*: I've sent the glue.

VERA: Thank you, Mihail Alexandrovitch, so much——

She sees NATALIA looking at her, and hurries into the hall.

RAKITIN goes to NATALIA; she holds out her hand, which he takes.

RAKITIN: Natalia Petrovna, what is the matter with you?

NATALIA: The sort of thing that can happen to anybody, surely. Like clouds trailing over the sky . . . *(After a pause.)* Why are you looking at me like that?

RAKITIN *(simply)*: Because when I look at you like this, I feel happy.

NATALIA *(smiling)*: Ah . . . *(After a pause.)* Open the study door, Michel, will you? It may make a breeze——

RAKITIN rises and opens the study door.

Welcome, O Zephyr-wind! The wild restless creature . . . *(Looking round.)* Try and drive him out if you can!

RAKITIN: And now you've changed again. Soft and still, like a summer evening after a thunderstorm.

NATALIA: Ah . . . Has there been a thunderstorm?

RAKITIN: Not quite, but it was gathering.

NATALIA *(after a pause)*: Do you know, Michel, you must be the kindest man in the world?

RAKITIN: But how dull that sounds——

NATALIA: I mean it, you're tolerant, you're affectionate, and you never never change. I owe so much to you; our feeling for each other is so sincere, so innocent. . . . And yet . . .

RAKITIN: And yet what?

NATALIA: There's something not quite—natural about it, do you know what I mean? Oh, I know we have the right to look not only my husband in the face, but the whole world—and yet . . . (*Thoughtfully.*) I suppose that's why I have this horrid desire to vent my bad temper, like a child with its nurse——

RAKITIN: With me as the nurse? A flattering comparison indeed——

NATALIA: Sometimes one takes pleasure in tormenting a creature one loves.

RAKITIN (*breathlessly*): A creature—one loves?

NATALIA: Of course, why should I pretend? I love you.

RAKITIN: Go on.

NATALIA: It comes over me sometimes, like a wave; 'I love him', I think to myself; and it's a wonderful peaceful feeling, warming my heart through and through. . . . And yet. . . .

RAKITIN: Another yet?

NATALIA: Well, you've never made me cry, have you? And it seems to me that if it *were* love . . .

RAKITIN: Natalia Petrovna, no more, do you mind?

NATALIA: No more?

RAKITIN: I'm afraid the happiness I possess may melt into thin air.

NATALIA: Oh, it mustn't do that. . . .

RAKITIN: I'm in your power; you can twist me round your little finger.

They look at each other.

YSLAEV'S VOICE (*in the ballroom*): Is the new tutor back from the dam yet?

MATVEI'S VOICE (*in the ballroom*): I haven't seen him come over, sir——



NATALIA (*rising, quickly*): Arkady's back—I don't want to see him——

RAKITIN: But my dear—your husband——

NATALIA: I know he's my husband, but I just don't want to see him——

She hurries into the study. RAKITIN looks after her, puzzled. A pause. YSLAEV enters from the ballroom. He is a prosperous landowner, seven years older than his wife; a kind pleasant man wrapped in his own affairs. He carries building plans.

YSLAEV: Ah, Michel—how are you today, my dear fellow?

RAKITIN: But we saw each other this morning!

YSLAEV: So we did, I beg your pardon . . . I've had a day, I can tell you, up to my neck—— (*Crossing and sitting at the desk, comparing his plan with others in the desk.*) D'you know, the oddest thing—the Russian peasant isn't at all a brainless fellow, shrewd as they make 'em—but you can tell him something in detail, explain it again, get it crystal clear . . . and you look at him and realise that not one word has sunk in, not one. The Russian——

RAKITIN: Still worrying about the dam?

YSLAEV: The Russian peasant is no fool, everybody knows that, but he hasn't got that—well, 'love of work', is the only way to put it—ah—(*putting aside the watercolours*)—where's my lady wife, bless her?

RAKITIN: She was in here a minute ago——

YSLAEV: Is it anywhere near tea? I've lost all sense of time; on my feet since dawn, it's appalling. . . . (*As RAKITIN smiles.*) I amuse you, dear boy—but every man has his niche in life; and being a stolid sort of a fellow, I was born to be a farmer, and nothing more. Beliaev hasn't asked for me, has he?

RAKITIN: Beliaev?

YSLAEV: The new tutor, haven't you seen him? He's no fool, just ran into him in the drive and asked him if he'd see how the workmen are getting on with the new building——

BELIAEV hurries in from the garden, from the right.
Well, my boy, how are they? Not doing a stroke, I bet?

BELIAEV: Oh yes, sir, at it hammer and tongs——

YSLAEV: *Are* they? Have they put down the second framework?

BELIAEV: They've started on the third. (*He is more at ease now he is alone with his own sex.*)

YSLAEV: That's something, anyway. Thank you, my boy, very much——

NATALIA *returns from the study, with a large portfolio of paintings.*

Ah, Natalia . . . how are you, my dear?

RAKITIN: But you're spending the whole day asking the same people about their health!

YSLAEV: I've told you, my dear fellow, it's overwork—snowed under! By the way, have I shown you my new winnowing machine?

NATALIA (*listlessly turning over pages*): No. . . .

YSLAEV: But my dear, it's the most interesting thing you've ever seen! One flick of the wrist, and the wind whizzes round—a devil of a gale! (*Rising.*) I tell you what—we'll just have time before tea—(*to RAKITIN*)—care to see it?——

RAKITIN: If you like——

YSLAEV: Coming, Natalia?

NATALIA: I don't understand the first thing about winnowing——

YSLAEV: Back in a trice——

He and RAKITIN go out into the garden, arm in arm, and disappear to the left. BELIAEV hesitates and makes to follow them.

NATALIA: Are you going out again?

BELIAEV (*turning*): Me? I was just . . . going for a walk——

NATALIA: Do you want to?

BELIAEV: No, not—not particularly, I've been walking all day.

NATALIA: That's what I thought. So won't you sit down? (*As he looks at her, overcome with shyness.*) As we haven't exchanged two words up till now, we can't say we've even properly met, can we? Won't you sit down?

BELIAEV (*bowing awkwardly and sitting*): That—that's very kind of you, madame.

NATALIA: You're afraid of me, aren't you?

BELIAEV (*overcome with shyness*): Oh, madame——

NATALIA: But when you get to know me, you won't be afraid of me any more. How old are you?

BELIAEV: Twenty-one.

NATALIA: Are your parents living?

BELIAEV: My father is, madame, yes.

NATALIA (*turning over pages*): Does he live in Moscow?

BELIAEV: No, madame, in the country.

NATALIA: Have you any brothers and sisters?

BELIAEV: One sister, younger than me.

NATALIA: What's her name?

BELIAEV: Natalia.

NATALIA (*looking up, eagerly*): Natalia! How very odd—my name's Natalia.

BELIAEV: Really, madame? (*Awkwardly.*) How odd.

A pause. She rises and places the portfolio on the table.

NATALIA: And you're very fond of her?

BELIAEV (*rising, politely*): Yes.

NATALIA: Our Kolia's already very much attached to you.

BELIAEV: I'm so glad. I am naturally anxious to give every satisfaction.

NATALIA: Oh . . . You see, Alexei Nikolaich, my idea is for him to grow up—free. (*Sitting in the armchair.*) Shall I tell you why?

BELIAEV: Madame?

NATALIA: Because I was brought up in a very different atmosphere. (*Motioning him to sit.*) My father was excessively stern; the entire household was frightened of him. Even now I feel the influence of those years of constraint—I know that the first impression I give is often one of—coldness, perhaps. . . . But I'm talking about myself—— were you kept under, as a child?

BELIAEV: I don't really know. Nobody bothered about me, either way.

NATALIA: But your father——?

BELIAEV: Oh, he was always out.

NATALIA: En voyage, you mean?

BELIAEV: No, he—he had his visiting.

NATALIA (*puzzled*): Paying calls?

BELIAEV: In a way, yes; he—(*blurting it out*)—he went round doing odd jobs.

NATALIA: Ah . . . I beg your pardon . . . (*Brushing the subject delicately aside.*) Alexei Nikolaich, was that you singing in the garden yesterday?

BELIAEV: Oh . . . (*Embarrassed.*) The lake is so far from the house, I didn't think——

NATALIA: There's no need to apologise, you have a very pleasant voice. . . . (*Suddenly rising.*) Do you know, Alexei Nikolaich, I feel at ease with you? My chattering away so disgracefully should prove that! We are going to be friends, are we not?

She holds out her hand. He takes it, hesitatingly, and after a moment of indecision, kisses it. She draws away her hand confused, as THE DOCTOR enters from the hall and sees them. BELIAEV crosses with exercise books and collects others from bookcase.

(*Embarrassed.*) Ah, Doctor——

THE DOCTOR (*over-hearty*): Natalia Petrovna, I go into your kitchen for my patient, and there he sits the picture of health, wolfing pancakes and onions! How can a man pursue medicine and the innocent profits deriving therefrom, when that sort of cheating goes on?

NATALIA (*crossing to the mirror over the desk*): Doctor, vous êtes impayable. . . . (*To BELIAEV, as he makes to go out.*) Oh, Alexei Nikolaich, I forgot to say——

VERA'S VOICE (*in the hall*): Alexei Nikolaich!

VERA runs in from the hall.

VERA (*calling*): Alexei—(*seeing NATALIA*)—oh.

NATALIA: Gracious, child, what a tomboy!

VERA: Kolia wants his new tutor—I mean Kolia asked me about the kite——

NATALIA: I see. Mais on n'entre pas comme cela dans une chambre. . . .

She tidies her hair in the mirror.

VERA (to BELIAEV): She did it!

BELIAEV: She didn't!

They both burst out laughing. NATALIA sees them in the mirror, while the DOCTOR watches all three.

BELIAEV (to VERA): You're not making it up?

VERA: Cross my heart—she just fell straight off!

NATALIA (into the mirror): Who fell off?

VERA (embarrassed): Oh . . . It was our swing—and Kolia's nurse took it into her head to——

She catches BELIAEV's eye and they both laugh again.

NATALIA (suddenly): Doctor!

THE DOCTOR: Madame!

NATALIA: Could I have a word with you?

THE DOCTOR (hurrying down): A votre service, madame.

NATALIA (to VERA): She didn't hurt herself, I hope?

VERA: Oh no—(to BELIAEV)—but she looked so funny——

BOTH laugh.

NATALIA (turning to them, severely): I don't think it was very wise, all the same.

BOTH stand, like scolded children. MATVEI enters from the hall.

MATVEI (announcing): Tea is served.

NATALIA: And the others?

MATVEI: All in the dining-room.

He goes back into the hall.

NATALIA (pointing to BELIAEV): Vera, allez en avant avec Monsieur.

VERA curtsies demurely to BELIAEV, and they both follow MATVEI.

THE DOCTOR (to NATALIA): You wanted to tell me something?

NATALIA (wiping her fingers on a paint-rag): Did I? Oh yes. . . . We haven't yet properly discussed your suggestion, have we?

THE DOCTOR: My suggestion? About Vera here and my friend——?

NATALIA: About Vera, and your friend. . . . Well, it was just to say that I'll think it over. . . . Yes, I'll think it over.

She walks, catches his eye, then goes out into the hall.

THE CURTAIN FALLS *quickly, rising immediately on*

SCENE II

A corner of the garden ; late afternoon of the next day. All we see is a fragment of lofty wall overgrown with creeper, with before it a garden seat facing the audience and a narrow path running from left to right, the whole set very near the audience. The scene is bathed in a soft glow which deepens as the evening advances.

A pause. MATVEI and KATIA (a buxom pretty servant-girl of twenty) stroll slowly from the left ; she carries a basket, he a watering-can. He looks worried, she bored. They sit on the seat. A pause.

MATVEI: Put me out o' me misery, there's a good girl.

KATIA: Matvei Egorych, I don't 'now *what* to say—it is kind of you——

MATVEI: I'm older than you ; it's no good me makin' out I'm not, because I am. But I'm in my prime, and if I may say so, a very good prime too. An' you know yourself what a respectable man I am, an' what more does a woman want than a respectable man?

KATIA: Nothing more at all.

MATVEI: Well?

KATIA: Matvei Egorych, it *is* kind of you' . . . but don't you think we ought to wait——

MATVEI: But, Katerina Vassilevna, excuse me—why? If you're afeared you might not be treated with respect, I can vouch for that—you'll have respect from me, Katerina Vassil-

evna, the like o' which no female ever yet got from a male, so 'elp me God; I've never had anything but good marks from the master and mistress, never a drop passes my lips, an' I'm a respectable man, what more does a woman want?

KATIA: Nothing more at all, it *is* kind of you——

MATVEI: I know it's kind of me, but what's the answer?

KATIA: Oh dear . . .

MATVEI rises, walks, then turns sharply on her.

MATVEI: It's my 'umble opinion, Kateřina Vassilevna, that you didn't always 'um an' 'aw like this.

KATIA (*confused*): Not always? How do you mean?

MATVEI: It's only lately you've been at it.

KATIA (*blushing*): I don't know what you're talking about—oh lock, here comes that nasty German——

MATVEI: That bilious object, can't stomach 'im—we'll have to thrash it out later——

He hurries off, to the right. KATIA is about to run off to the left, when she runs into SHAAF, a fishing rod over one shoulder.

SHAAF: Vither, o vither, my fair Katerina, ja?

KATIA: The housekeeper sent me to pick some red currants, in a great hurry——

SHAAF: Currant are gut fruit. You are currant fond, ja?

KATIA: I quite like them, thank you——

SHAAF: Me currant also fond, he he he! I am fond wid everyting dat you are fond wid. Currant pliss?

KATIA: Oh, I couldn't spare one—I'd catch it from the housekeeper——

SHAAF: I komme catch mit you. (*Pointing to the fishing rod.*) What ist dies you call it? Fishing catch mit fishing-schtick? You underschtand fishing-schtick? You like fishes?

KATIA: I quite like them, thank you——

SHAAF: Also fishes me like, he he he. Do you know what I schpeak mit you now? A leedle sonk, a leedle sonk für Katerina. . . . (*Singing, heavily.*) 'Katerinchen, Katerinchen, wie lieb'ich dich so sehr', which means one ting, one leedle ting . . . loff, loff, loff!

He tries to put his arm round her.

KATIA: Oh no, please—an old gentleman like you, it doesn't look a bit nice—give over!—there's somebody coming——

She darts off to the right.

SHAAF (*muttering, sternly, his skittish manner gone*): Shaaf, das ist dumm. . . .

NATALIA *enters from the left, arm in arm with RAKITIN; she carries a parasol, he a magazine. She is much more restless than before.*

NATALIA: Ah, Adam Ivanych . . . where's Kolia?

SHAAF: Kolia ist in schkul-room mit Lizaveta Bogdanovna vitch titch him de bianoforte blay.

NATALIA: Good. . . . Have you seen the new tutor?

SHAAF: No. He zay dat he choin me.

He bows and shambles off to the left.

NATALIA (*after a pause, calling*): Adam Ivanych, we'll come and keep you company while you blay mit your fishing-schtick—what do you say to that?

SHAAF'S VOICE: Boodiful lady, vot an honour, vot an honour——

RAKITIN (*aside, to NATALIA*): Now why on earth do you want to saddle us——

NATALIA: Come along, handsome stranger. Beau ténébreux. . . .

They drift out of sight, to the left. KATIA appears cautiously from the right.

KATIA: That horrible old German, what a blessing, gives me the creeps . . .

She sighs, dreamily, then sits on the seat, and hums snatches of a song.

(*Singing*) Must I love and have no lover
While my heart it glows and burns
Not with passion, but with Russian
Melancholy sighs it yearns. . . .

Matvei Egorych was right, what he said, about humming and hawing . . . oh dear . . .

(*Singing*) Not with madness but with sadness
My heart its cruel lesson learns
Not with madness——

*BELIAEV and VERA enter from the right. He carries a kite
KATIA sees them and stops singing.*

BELIAEV: Katia, why have you stopped?

(*Singing*) Not with sadness but with madness
My heart the art of kissing learns!

KATIA (*blushing, and giggling*): Oh . . . we don't sing it with those words . . .

BELIAEV: What are you picking—currants? I love currants.

KATIA (*handing him the basket*): Take them all.

BELIAEV: All? I couldn't do that. . . . Would you like some, Vera Alexandrovna? (*As he and VERA take a few.*) Shall we sit here?

VERA: Shall we?

KATIA *wanders off to the right. They munch for a moment.*

BELIAEV: Now—(*showing the kite*)—this fellow's tail's got to be tied on. Will you give me a hand?

VERA: Delighted, sir——

BELIAEV (*as he and VERA sit on the seat*): There . . . (*Arranging the kite over her knee.*) Mind you hold it dead straight, or there'll be the devil to pay.

VERA (*laughing*): I'll be careful. (*As he begins to tie on the tail.*) But if you sit like that how can I watch you?

BELIAEV (*looking at her*): Why do you want to watch me?

VERA: To see just how you're tying it on.

BELIAEV: Oh . . . One minute. . . . (*Moving round so she can see, and calling.*) Katia, where's that lusty treble? Pipe up!

KATIA *is heard giggling, to the right.*

VERA: Did you sometimes fly kites in Moscow?

BELIAEV: Good lord no. I had no time for kites in Moscow! Press with your finger, will you? . . . No, butter-fingers, like

this. . . . Do you really think that all we have to do in the great city is to fly kites?

VERA: Well, how *do* you spend your time in the great city?

BELIAEV: Oh . . . Studying.

VERA: I suppose—(*after a pause*)—you have hundreds of friends in Moscow?

BELIAEV: Oh yes. . . . D'you know, I don't think this string's going to be strong enough—

VERA (*anxiously*): Are you very attached to them?

BELIAEV: I should think I am! (*Intent on the kite.*) Aren't you fond of your friends?

VERA: I haven't any.

BELIAEV: I mean girl friends.

VERA: Oh.

BELIAEV: Oh what?

KATIA'S voice is heard, singing in snatches.

VERA: They don't seem to have been very much in my thoughts lately.

BELIAEV: Anyway, how can you say you haven't any men friends? What about me?

VERA (*with a smile*): Oh, you're different. . . . (*After a pause.*) Alexei Nikolaich, do you write poetry?

BELIAEV: No.

VERA: Oh. (*After a pause.*) At the boarding school I went to, there was one girl who did.

BELIAEV: Wrote poetry? Good lord. . . . (*Using his teeth to tighten the knot in the string.*) Was it any good?

VERA: I don't really know. She read it out to us, and we all cried.

BELIAEV: Cried? Good lord, why?

VERA: Because we felt sorry for her.

BELIAEV: For writing such bad poetry?

VERA: Oh no, because it was so sad.

BELIAEV: Was your school in Moscow?

VERA: Madame Bolusse's. Natalia Petrovna took me away last year.

BELIAEV: Are you fond of Natalia Petrovna?

VERA : Oh, very. She's been so kind to me.

BELIAEV : Are you afraid of her as well ?

She looks at him ; he grins at her.

VERA (*smiling*) : A little bit, yes. . . .

BELIAEV (*after a pause*) : And who sent you to the school ?

VERA : Her mother, she brought me up. I'm an orphan.

BELIAEV : An orphan ? (*Putting down the kite.*) Are you really ?

VERA : Yes.

KATIA starts to sing again.

BELIAEV : My mother died too. So I'm a sort of orphan as well.

VERA : Both orphans. . . .

BELIAEV : It's not our fault, so there's no point in getting depressed about it, is there ?

VERA : They say orphans make friends sooner than anybody.

BELIAEV : Do they ?

He looks into her eyes. KATIA stops singing. A pause. He goes back to his work.

How long have I been here ? Three, or four——

VERA : Twenty-eight days counting today.

BELIAEV : What a memory ! A whole month, in the country. . . . There, finished ! Look at that tail, there's a swisher for you——

KATIA returns from the right, goes up to him with her basket.
(*Rising.*) Now to get Kolia——

KATIA : Would you like some more currants, sir ?

BELIAEV : No thank you, Katia.

KATIA (*disappointed*) : Oh . . .

She walks slowly back to the right.

BELIAEV : Where is Kolia, d'you know ?

VERA : Over in the schoolroom with Lizaveta Bogdanovna.

BELIAEV : Keeping a child indoors in this weather——

VERA : Do you know she spoke very nicely about you yesterday ?

BELIAEV : Lizaveta Bogdanovna ? Did she ?

VERA : Don't you like her ?

BELIAEV : Never thought about it. (*Finishing off the kite.*) She can take snuff till she's black in the face, I'm just not interested.

A pause. VERA sighs.

Why are you sighing?

VERA : I don't know. What a blue sky. . . .

BELIAEV : Is that why you're sighing? Perhaps you're bored?

VERA : Bored? Oh no. . . .

BELIAEV : You're not sickening for something, are you?

VERA : No, but . . . well.—Yesterday I was going up to fetch a book, and suddenly—imagine—I just sat on the stairs and burst into tears.

BELIAEV : Good lord.

VERA : What could it mean, do you think? Because I'm really quite happy.

BELIAEV (*turning to her*) : Shall I tell you what it is?

VERA : What?

BELIAEV : Growing pains.

VERA : Oh . . .

BELIAEV (*back to the kite*) : So that's why your eyes looked so swollen last night. . . .

VERA : You noticed?

BELIAEV : Of course I noticed.

She looks at him, he is looking at the kite.

A pause. KATIA is heard singing, very faintly, some way off.

VERA *listens*.

VERA (*thoughtfully*) : Alexei Nikolaich . . .

BELIAEV : Hmm?

VERA : Am I like her?

BELIAEV : Not a bit.

VERA (*disappointed*) : Oh.

BELIAEV : For one thing, you're better-looking.

VERA : Am I?

He looks at her ; an embarrassed pause.

BELIAEV (*breaking it*) : Well, Vera Alexandrovna, what about young Kolia?

VERA : Why don't you call me Vérochka ?

BELIAEV : Shall I ? And what about your calling me Alexei ?

VERA : Shall I ? (*Starting.*) Oh bother——

BELIAEV : What is it——

VERA (*in a subdued voice*) : Natalia Petrovna——

BELIAEV (*catching her tone*) : Let's go in to Kolia, shall we ? He's bound to have finished his doh-ray-me by now——

VERA : Oh, do you think we ought ?

They both disappear to the right. NATALIA and RAKITIN re-enter from the left.

NATALIA : Surely that was Vérochka scurrying along ?

RAKITIN : Was it ?

NATALIA : But they looked exactly as if they were running away from us !

RAKITIN : Perhaps they are.

NATALIA : Seriously, I don't think it at all *convenable* for her to be wandering in the garden all by herself with a young man, really I don't.

RAKITIN : I thought you said she was a child.

NATALIA : What ? Of course she's a child—-but still, it's not quite proper. I shall have to be cross with her.

RAKITIN : How old is she ?

NATALIA : Seventeen. . . . (*Sitting.*) Where's the Doctor, he hasn't gone, has he ?

RAKITIN (*sitting next to her*) : I rather think he has——

NATALIA : Oh, how provoking, why didn't you get him to stay ? . . . Why a character like that should ever have disguised himself as a provincial apothecary, I can't imagine. He's *so* amusing.

RAKITIN : I had an idea you weren't in a laughing mood today.

NATALIA : Because I've taken against sentimentality ? I have, I warn you—nothing, absolutely nothing, could touch me today, I've a heart of stone. . . . But I wanted to see the Doctor, it *is* provoking of you——

RAKITIN : May I ask what about ?

NATALIA : You may not, you already know every single

thing I do, exactly why I do it—I have an uncontrollable desire to conceal something from you.

RAKITIN: Since I watch you so closely, shall I tell you one thing I have observed?

A pause. She looks at him, then away.

NATALIA: I am all ears.

RAKITIN: You won't be annoyed with me?

NATALIA: I should like to be, but I shan't succeed. Go on.

RAKITIN: For some time, Natalia Petrovna, you've been in a state of constant fretfulness.

NATALIA: Go on.

RAKITIN: Not ordinary short temper—but a fretting from within. You appear to be . . . in conflict with your own self. (*As NATALIA traces a pattern in the dust with her parasol.*) I've heard you sigh. Deep long breaths: the sighs of a creature immensely tired, who can never, never come to rest.

A pause. KATIA's voice, singing.

NATALIA: And what do you conclude from all that, Monsieur le Microscope?

RAKITIN: I conclude nothing. But it causes me concern——

NATALIA (*suddenly impatient*): Oh, for Heaven's sake let's change the subject.

A pause. KATIA's voice dies away.

RAKITIN: You don't intend going for a drive today——

NATALIA (*suddenly*): Tell me, what do you think of Bolshintsov?

RAKITIN: Our neighbour, you mean, Afanasy Ivanych?

NATALIA: Yes.

RAKITIN: Well, I never thought to hear you ask tenderly after a beef-witted old Jumbo like Bolshintsov. Though I must concede I can't think of anything worse against him.

NATALIA: Oh, he just came into my head.

A pause.

RAKITIN: Look at the dark green of that oak, against the velvet blue of the sky . . . the deep glow of those colours . . . isn't it perfect? What a wealth of life and strength stand embodied in that tree! And then look at this slim young

birch ; her tiny leaves shimmer with a sort of liquid radiance, as if they were melting before our eyes. . . . And yet, in her way, the birch is as lovely as the oak.

A pause.

NATALIA : Rakitin, shall I tell you something ?

RAKITIN : Do——

NATALIA : Something about you which I noticed ages ago—*(looking at him)*—I might even say ‘observed’. . . . You feel the beauties of Nature in a very rarefied way, and expatiate upon them most elegantly ; so elegantly, indeed, that in return for the meticulous metaphors you shower upon her, I can imagine Nature saying, ‘Really, it is good of that tall gentleman to say those kind things about me.’ You court her as a scented marquis in red heels might court a rosy peasant girl. The only fly in the ointment, my dear, is that just as the girl would find every single compliment miles above her head, so Nature doesn’t understand a word you say. And shall I tell you why ? Because, thank Heaven, she is much coarser than you have any knowledge of ; and she’s coarse because she’s healthy. Birch-trees don’t melt or fade away, for the simple reason they’re not highly-strung young ladies, they’re birch-trees.

RAKITIN : What an onslaught ! . . . I’m a morbid creature : I see.

NATALIA : Oh, you’re not the only one. I don’t think either of us is spiritually bursting with health.

RAKITIN : That’s another thing I’ve observed.

NATALIA : What ?

RAKITIN : Your trick of putting the nastiest things in the most innocent way. Instead of calling somebody an idiot, you turn to him with a smile and say ‘Mon cher ami, you and I are fools.’

NATALIA : Well, if the word ‘morbid’ doesn’t appeal to you, then I’ll just say we’re both old. As old as the hills.

RAKITIN : I don’t feel particularly ancient.

NATALIA : Do you realise that not ten minutes ago, sharing the same garden seat, two creatures sat together who can truly claim to be young ?

A pause.

RAKITIN: You envy them their artless candour, their innocence—in short, their stupidity?

NATALIA: Do you think they're stupid? Oh, Rakitin, that's so like you! Anyway, what's the point of cleverness if it doesn't amuse?

KATIA *enters from the right, carrying her basket.*

Ah, Katia! Have you been picking fruit, my dear?

KATIA: Yes, madame——

NATALIA: Let me look. (*Peering into the basket.*) What gorgeous currants, how red they are——

KATIA: Aren't they, madame——

NATALIA: Not as red as your cheeks, though, Katia——

KATIA (*smiling and blushing*): Oh, madame, do you think so——

NATALIA: I do indeed—(*suddenly weary*)—you may go, my dear. . . .

KATIA *curtseys and hurries off to the left.*

RAKITIN: Another callow creature who appeals to you.

NATALIA: Yes, she's young too. (*Rising, suddenly.*) It's time Vérochka was in. Au revoir, mon ami.

She opens her parasol and walks slowly away to the right.

A pause.

RAKITIN: She was right, Mihail Alexandrovich Rakitin—every minute of every day, you spend on the look-out for trivialities, and in the end you've turned into a triviality yourself. (*After a pause.*) And yet . . . I cannot live without her; to part from Natalia Petrovna would be to leave life itself. . . . What is this unrest of hers? Is she tired of me? I know too well the kind of love she bears me—but I had hopes that in time . . . What am I saying—she's a virtuous woman, and I am not a philanderer . . . (*smiling, wryly*) . . . worse luck. . . . (*Walking up and down.*) What a beautiful day! (*After a pause.*) Meticulous metaphors, indeed. . . . And why this sudden passion for simplicity? It all seems to go with that new tutor. She couldn't be . . . no, that's out of the question, she's just in a bad mood; Heaven knows, time will show. (*Sitting again.*)

. . . And it's not the first occasion in your life, my boy, that after a conference with yourself, you've had to throw all your theories overboard, fold your arms meekly and wait for events.

He opens his magazine. BELIAEV comes strolling back from the right.

Ah, Alexei Nikolaich ! Are you after a breath of fresh air too ?

BELIAEV : Indeed I am, sir ! What a lovely day !

RAKITIN : Won't you sit down ?

BELIAEV : Thank you. (*He sits.*)

RAKITIN (*after a pause*) : Did you see Natalia Petrovna ?

BELIAEV : Yes, walking over to the schoolroom, with Vera.

RAKITIN : And how do you take to the rustic life ?

BELIAEV : Oh, capitally, except for the shooting. That's pretty poor.

RAKITIN : Oh. Are you partial to shooting ?

BELIAEV : Very. Are you, sir ?

RAKITIN : I'm afraid not. I'm a deplorable shot ; much too lazy.

BELIAEV : I'm lazy too, I'm afraid, but not where sport's concerned.

RAKITIN : And entertaining the ladies—are you lazy where that's concerned ?

BELIAEV : You're laughing at me, sir. . . . To tell you the honest truth, I'm rather afraid of them.

RAKITIN : The ladies ? . . . Are you ? But why should you think I was laughing at you ?

BELIAEV : I don't know, I just did. It doesn't matter, sir, really. . . . (*After a pause.*) Could you tell me where I can get some gun-powder ?

RAKITIN : Gun-powder ? In the town, I should think, but very poor quality—

BELIAEV : That would do—it's not for shooting, it's for fireworks.

RAKITIN : Fireworks ? You mean you can make them ?

BELIAEV : Oh yes. I've already picked a spot, on the other side of the lake. As it's little Kolia's birthday tomorrow, I thought it would be just the thing.

RAKITIN : I'm sure Natalia Petrovna will be very touched by your kind thought. (*He has lingered a little over her name.*)

BELIAEV : Oh, do you think so ?

RAKITIN : She's taken a liking to you. Did you know ?

BELIAEV : Has she really, sir ? I'm so glad. . . . Excuse me, sir, isn't that a Moscow magazine ?

RAKITIN (*giving it to him*) : Do have it, I've finished——

BELIAEV : Oh, thank you, sir——

RAKITIN : It's a poetry review, I take it because they sometimes publish tolerably good verse.

BELIAEV : Oh. (*Putting down the magazine, disappointed.*) Too bad.

RAKITIN : Why ?

BELIAEV : I'm not very struck on poetry.

RAKITIN : Oh. What have you against it ?

BELIAEV : I think it's rather affected. I like funny rhymes, of course, but that's different.

RAKITIN : It is, rather. . . . You prefer novels ?

BELIAEV : Oh yes, I like something that tells a story. . . .

RAKITIN : Do you dabble in writing yourself ?

BELIAEV : Lord no, I haven't any gifts for it and I know better than to try. I've got my work cut out trying to fathom what others get on to paper.

RAKITIN : Do you realise, Alexei Nikolaich, that very few young men have your common sense ?

BELIAEV : Thank you, sir. . . . (*After a pause.*) I chose the lake because I know how to make Roman candles that'll burn on the water.

RAKITIN : Do you really ? That must be a lovely sight. . . . Alexei Nikolaich, do you speak French ?

BELIAEV : I'm afraid I don't—my laziness again. I'd give a lot to master Georges Sand in the original—she's a woman of course, but damnably good reading. Thank the Lord other people aren't quite such loafers as I am.

RAKITIN : Now you're exaggerating——

BELIAEV : No, I'm not ; you see, I know myself.

RAKITIN: I know something about you that you're not aware of.

BELIAEV: Oh? What is it?

RAKITIN: I know that what you look on as a fault in yourself—your naturalness—is the very thing which attracts people to you.

BELIAEV: Attracts people? Who, for example?

RAKITIN: Natalia Petrovna?

BELIAEV: Natalia Petrovna? Oddly enough, she's the one person with whom I don't feel in the least . . . natural, as you put it.

RAKITIN: Ah . . . indeed?

BELIAEV: And when all's said and done, surely the most important asset in a man isn't naturalness, but breeding? It's all very well for you, you've *got* breeding. . . . Excuse me, sir—you're rather an odd character, aren't you?

RAKITIN: Am I?

A pause.

BELIAEV: Did you hear that? Sounded like a corn-crake——

RAKITIN: Perhaps it was. . . . (*As BELIAEV rises quickly.*) What is it?

BELIAEV: I'm going to the green-house for my shot-gun——

He makes to go off to the right, and meets NATALIA.

NATALIA: Alexei Nikolaich, where are you tearing off to?

BELIAEV: Oh . . . I was just . . .

RAKITIN: He heard a corn-crake, and was fetching his gun.

NATALIA (*to BELIAEV*): Oh, don't do any shooting in the garden, do you mind? Let the poor bird live—besides, it would scare Kolia's Granny out of her skin!

BELIAEV (*confused*): I beg pardon, madame, I'm sure . . .

NATALIA (*laughing*): Alexei Nikolaich, what a thing to say! 'I beg pardon, madame, I'm sure', talking like a servant! Mihail Alexandrovich here and I will take you under our wing—c'est entendu—c'est entendu——

BELIAEV: It's very good of you——

NATALIA: First lesson—no diffidence. That's very im-

portant; it doesn't suit you at all. . . . Oh yes, we'll take you in hand! You're a young man, while he and I—(*pointing her parasol at RAKITIN*)—are old people. You get busy on my little Kolia, and we'll get busy on you!

BELIAEV: It's wonderfully kind of you——

NATALIA: C'est ça. . . . What have you done with your kite?

BELIAEV: I left it in the schoolroom. I thought you didn't like it.

NATALIA (*embarrassed*): Whatever made you think that? Because I told Vérochka—because I sent her in? (*With animation.*) Do you know what we'll do? Kolia must have finished strumming by now, we'll go over and fetch him, and Vérochka, and the kite, and all go into a field and fly it! What do you say?

BELIAEV: It would be wonderful, Natalia Petrovna——

NATALIA: Splendid. Take my hand! (*As he hesitates, holding out first one hand, then the other.*) Oh, how awkward you are—maladroit—come along—off we go!

She and BELIAEV hurry off, hand in hand, to the right.

RAKITIN *looks after them.*

RAKITIN: I've never seen that expression on her face before. That smile, soft and yet crystal-clear, a look of—yes—a look of welcome. . . . (*In a sudden outburst.*) O God, spare me the pangs of jealousy! . . . Especially when it's as futile as this. . . .

THE DOCTOR *strolls on from the left, followed by BOLSHINTSOV, who lives up to the DOCTOR's description of him: near fifty, fat, good-natured, slow-witted, and extremely timid. (Jauntily.)* Well well, it's an ill wind——

THE DOCTOR: The lodge-keeper told us the whole family was in the garden—so here we are!

RAKITIN: But why didn't you come straight up the drive?

THE DOCTOR: As a matter of fact, Afanasy Ivanych here wanted to call in at the kitchen garden to have a look at the mushrooms.

BOLSHINTSOV (*puzzled*): But I——

THE DOCTOR (*to him*): Now we all know your passion for mushrooms. . . .

RAKITIN: If you'd rather stay out of doors, I'll go and tell Natalia Petrovna where you are—I have to go over, anyway—

THE DOCTOR: Ah well, in that case we won't detain you. Please don't stand on ceremony—

RAKITIN: Thank you. Au revoir, gentlemen.

He bows and hurries off to the right.

THE DOCTOR: Au revoir. (*To BOLSHINTSOV.*) Now, Afanasy Ivanych, everything depends on—

BOLSHINTSOV (*agitated*): Ignaty Illyich, you could have knocked me down with a feather. . . . Mushrooms!

THE DOCTOR: Did you expect me to tell him that you were so goggle-eyed with nerves you begged to go miles out of our way, just to gain time?

BOLSHINTSOV: But I don't think I've ever *seen* a mushroom. . . . It may be very slow of me, but I—

THE DOCTOR: It *is* very slow of you, my old dear, and you're leaving the whole thing to me, because I'm that much quicker. . . . When I think you forced me here at the point of a blunderbuss—

BOLSHINTSOV: I know, my friend, but on my own property I feel ready for anything. But now I *am* here, I feel quite giddy. . . . Ignaty Illyich, you interviewed the older person—what *was* her exact answer, yes or no?

THE DOCTOR: Afanasy Ivanych, what is the span from your village to this august domain?

BOLSHINTSOV: Er—fifteen miles—

THE DOCTOR: During those fifteen miles, Afanasy Ivanych, you have asked me that identical question as regular as clock-work, three times to the mile. I have vouchsafed forty-five answers; and now prick up your ears, my old rabbit, for here comes the forty-sixth, and the last. (*Placing him on the seat and sitting beside him.*) This is, word for word, what Natalia Petrovna said to me—

BOLSHINTSOV (*eagerly*): Yes?

THE DOCTOR (*quoting, slowly*): 'Doctor, on the—'

BOLSHINTSOV (*avidly*): Yes, I see——

THE DOCTOR (*irritated*): What d'you mean, you see, I haven't told you anything yet! She said, 'Doctor, on the one hand I——'

BOLSHINTSOV (*holding out his hand*): 'On the one hand——yes——'

THE DOCTOR: 'On the one hand, I know very little about Monsieur Bolshintsov——'

BOLSHINTSOV: Monsieur? But I'm not a Frenchman——

THE DOCTOR: I know you're not, and so does she, but as I've told you forty-five times, she fancies you better in French. We'll have another shot. . . . 'Doctor, I know very little about Monsieur Bolshintsov, but he looks kind.'

BOLSHINTSOV: 'Kind.' That's nice. . . .

THE DOCTOR: 'On the other hand,' she went on——

BOLSHINTSOV (*holding out the other hand, thoughtfully*): The other hand, yes——

THE DOCTOR: 'On the other hand, I will not bring pressure to bear on Vérochka, but again on the other hand——(*as BOLSHINTSOV holds out the first hand again*) . . . if he comes to win her respect, I shall place no obstacles.' In a word, Afanasy Ivanych, it's up to you to convince the young lady that marrying you would make her happy.

BOLSHINTSOV (*after thought*): It's a tall order.

THE DOCTOR: Of course it's a tall order—but cut a dash, my old friend, cut a dash!

BOLSHINTSOV: Cut a dash, yes, that's it. . . . But there is one thing, Ignaty Illyich; you may not believe me, but I have, from my tenderest years, made little contact with the fair sex.

THE DOCTOR: You stagger me.

BOLSHINTSOV: Well, they say it's the first step that counts, don't they—I wondered if you could think of a witty word or two to start the ball rolling? And as for paying you back——

THE DOCTOR: *Paying me?* (*Rising, and drawing himself up*): You do not labour, I trust, under the impression that I am bargaining with you?

BOLSHINTSOV (*rising*): No no, but just to say that if you pull this off you can count on more than I said.

THE DOCTOR: Tch, tch, I have no wish to—(*sitting, and pulling BOLSHINTSOV down with him*)—how d'you mean, more than you said?

BOLSHINTSOV: You know when your nag broke her leg and you said it was a disgrace for a doctor to be seen trudging about like a peasant?

THE DOCTOR: *And* I meant it, my friend—a doctor has as much right to do his rounds on horseback as any lord of the manor—

BOLSHINTSOV: Well, I'll not only replace your beast, I'll give you the team.

THE DOCTOR: The team? You mean—

BOLSHINTSOV: The three horses, and the wagonette with 'em.

THE DOCTOR (*his eyes shining*): Wagonette. . . . Now where was I. . . . You have under you—three hundred serfs, is it?

BOLSHINTSOV: Three hundred and twenty.

THE DOCTOR: The most eligible bachelor in all the Russias. . . . Always remembering, of course, that young female persons are partial to a good figure. Now yours, while eminently respectable in every way, is a drawback.

BOLSHINTSOV (*depressed*): A drawback. . . .

THE DOCTOR: But you have another source to draw from—the gushing spring, my dear Afanasy Illyich, of your virtues; and, of course, of your three hundred and twenty serfs. . . . To cut a long story, I should simply say to the young person—

BOLSHINTSOV: Yes?

THE DOCTOR: 'Vera Alexandrovna!'

BOLSHINTSOV (*muttering, his eyes closed*): 'Vera Alexandrovna. . . .'

THE DOCTOR (*as BOLSHINTSOV repeats after him, to himself*): 'I am a simple, mild man, and not poor; I should be obliged if you would take a little more notice of me than heretofore, and having made inquiries, give me your answer.'

BOLSHINTSOV (*lost in admiration*): That was a first-rate speech, Ignaty Illyich.

THE DOCTOR: Not bad, was it?

BOLSHINTSOV: Just one thing, my dear friend. . . . You mentioned the word 'mild'—you called me 'a mild man'.

THE DOCTOR: Well, aren't you mild?

BOLSHINTSOV: Yes yes, of course . . . but still—

THE DOCTOR (*sternly*): But still what?

BOLSHINTSOV (*after a pause*): No, just tell her I'm a mild man.

THE DOCTOR: One more thing—you won't take offence?

BOLSHINTSOV: No no, my dear friend—out with it—

THE DOCTOR: You have a regrettable habit, Afanasy Illyich, of mispronouncing French words, and I think it would be safest not to use them.

BOLSHINTSOV: Oh dear.

THE DOCTOR: For instance, once when you meant to imply that a certain person was distinguished—'distinguée'—I heard you exclaim 'The lady looks distinky'. One knows what you mean, but one is not impressed. (*Looking.*) And here they all are— (*As BOLSHINTSOV makes to go.*) Now now, where are you off to? Mushrooms again?

BOLSHINTSOV (*smiling and blushing*): Oh dear—

NATALIA *returns from the right, followed by VERA, BELIAEV KOLIA (carrying the kite), RAKITIN, and LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA. NATALIA is in high spirits.*

NATALIA (*to BOLSHINTSOV and the DOCTOR*): Ah, gentlemen! How are you, Doctor, an unexpected treat! Oh by the way, you won't forget our picnic tomorrow for Kolia's birthday, will you? And are you well, Afanasy Illyich?

BOLSHINTSOV (*raising his hat, perspiring and muttering, acutely embarrassed*): Thank you, lady—thank you—

NATALIA: And to what do we owe this pleasure, Doctor?

THE DOCTOR: My friend here insisted on bringing me with him.

NATALIA: Oh ho! So you have to be dragged here, do you?

THE DOCTOR: Dragged? Good heavens—

NATALIA: Now I've got you into a muddle—hurrah!

THE DOCTOR (*as the others laugh*): It's extremely kind of you to take it like that, Natalia Petrovna. And if I may pass such a remark, it is very pleasant to find you in such a gay mood.

NATALIA: You find it necessary to comment on it? Is it then so very rare?

THE DOCTOR: Good heavens no—good heavens——

NATALIA: Monsieur le Diplomate is getting into more and more of a tangle——

KOLIA (*eagerly*): Maman, when do we fly the kite?

NATALIA: Any time you like, my pet. (*To BELIAEV.*) Come along, Alexei Nikolaich—(*as VERA runs impulsively forward*)—and you, Vera darling—we'll go into the field. (*To the others.*) I don't think any of you would find it much fun, so I'll leave them in your charge, Lizaveta Bogdanovna.

RAKITIN (*as she starts to go*): But Natalia Petrovna, why do you think we wouldn't be amused?

NATALIA: Because you're so clever. . . . (*To BELIAEV and VERA.*) Ready, children?

She hurries off to the left, taking KOLIA by the hand, followed by BELIAEV. VERA makes to follow; BOLSHINTSOV tries to intercept her, but cannot get a word out. She stifles a giggle and follows the others. RAKITIN looks after them, puzzled and unhappy; the DOCTOR takes his arm, slyly.

THE DOCTOR: Just look at the four of them, tearing up to the field! Let's go and see how they get on, shall we? Even though we are so clever! . . . (*Turning and seeing BOLSHINTSOV standing alone, the picture of disconsolation, then calling.*) Lizaveta Bogdanovna!

LIZAVETA (*eagerly*): Doctor . . .

THE DOCTOR (*to BOLSHINTSOV*): Our good Afanasy Ivanych, would you offer your arm to this good lady?

BOLSHINTSOV: Only too pleased. . . .

LIZAVETA: Mutual, I'm sure, mutual. . . .

THE DOCTOR: Afanasy Ivanych, you two in front, what d'you think?

BOLSHINTSOV gives LIZAVETA his arm, ceremoniously; they walk; the others watch them.

BOLSHINTSOV (*stiffly*): The weather is very pleasant today, is it not, in a manner of speaking?

LIZAVETA: Isn't it just . . .

They disappear to the left.

THE DOCTOR (*to RAKITIN*): Mihail Alexandrovich . . . (*As RAKITIN laughs.*) What are you laughing at?

RAKITIN: I suppose I'm tickled at our bringing up the rear like this.

THE DOCTOR (*as they cross, arm in arm*): Ah, but don't forget, my dear friend, that the rear guard can only too easily become the advance guard. Shall I tell you how?

RAKITIN: How?

THE DOCTOR: By everybody turning round and going the other way. Ha ha. . . .

They follow the others.

The CURTAIN falls quickly, rising immediately on

SCENE III

The drawing-room, the next morning. Early sunlight. A coffee tray on the footstool before the sofa. RAKITIN and the DOCTOR come in from the hall, arm in arm.

THE DOCTOR (*speaking as he enters*): . . . And to cut a long story short, Mihail Alexandrovich—will you give an old friend a helping hand?

RAKITIN: But my dear Ignaty Illyich, I don't quite—

THE DOCTOR: Now see here, my dear old fellow, just for a moment, put yourself in my place. Mind you, I'm really a looker-on, as I'm only dabbling in this to please a bosom friend. . . . (*Sitting on the sofa.*) Oh dear, my soft old heart will be the ruin of me!

RAKITIN (*smiling*): I wouldn't say you were anywhere near ruin at the moment—

THE DOCTOR (*laughing*): Ah ha! Joking apart, old dear, Natalia Petrovna gave me permission to tell the old boy her

answer. And now that I have, she's gone into her sulks as if I'd done the wrong thing entirely; and he hangs round my coat-tails like a dear old sheep-dog.

RAKITIN (*sitting next to him, and pouring out coffee*): Doesn't it seem a pity, Ignaty Illyich, that you stuck your finger in this pie at all? Old Bolshintsov's a fool, now, isn't he?

THE DOCTOR: Of course he's a fool, but if we only allowed the clever ones to get married the race would die out! . . . Stuck my finger in the pie, indeed—a bosom friend begged me to put a word in—my finger was stuck in for me, voilà! Could I refuse, with my soft heart?

RAKITIN: But nobody's blaming you—though we're all entitled to wonder why you're taking so much trouble.

THE DOCTOR: But because the old boy's a very old friend of mine!

RAKITIN: Is he really?

They catch each other's eye, and both laugh.

THE DOCTOR: There's no pulling wool over your eyes. The fact is, dear fellow, one of my horses has broken his leg.

RAKITIN: And your old friend is mending it for you?

THE DOCTOR: No.

RAKITIN: He's promised you a new horse?

THE DOCTOR: A team of three, and a wagonette.

RAKITIN: Ah . . . Now I see daylight!

THE DOCTOR: But I wouldn't like you to think I'd be a go-between if he wasn't of the highest character.

RAKITIN: No no——

THE DOCTOR: The whole thing, quite frankly, goes very much against the grain with me—snuff?

RAKITIN: No thank you——

THE DOCTOR (*sniffing*): If only I could squeeze a definite 'yes' or 'no' out of her . . . You see, the old boy's as innocent as a babe unborn; and besides, his intentions being of the highest order——

RAKITIN: And his horses. . . .

THE DOCTOR: And his horses——

RAKITIN: But where do I come in?

THE DOCTOR: Do we not all know the esteem in which you are held by the lady in question—be an angel from heaven, my dear old Mihail Alexandrovich, put in a word for me——

RAKITIN: Is it your honest opinion that he's a good match for this girl?

THE DOCTOR: If he isn't, then strike me dead where I stand. The first thing in a marriage is a stable character, and the old boy's more than stable, he—he's immovable. I think I hear Natalia Petrovna now—my dear old friend, my benefactor, remember—two chestnuts and a dream of a brown mare—will you do it for me?

RAKITIN (*smiling*): All right, I'll do my best——

THE DOCTOR: The Lord will bless you. Two chestnuts, and a brown!

He hurries into the ballroom as NATALIA enters from the study. She sees RAKITIN and stops.

NATALIA (*hesitating*): Oh . . . I thought you were in the garden.

RAKITIN: You look over-joyed to see me——

NATALIA: Oh, don't. . . . Who was that?

RAKITIN: The Doctor.

NATALIA: That provincial Machiavelli. . . . He's still hovering, is he?

RAKITIN: He's staying on for the picnic to which you invited him. The provincial Machiavelli is out of favour today.

NATALIA: He's good value from time to time, but he's inclined to meddle, which I detest. (*Walking about.*) Besides, with all his fawning, he's very impertinent, *and* a cynic. . . . (*Sharply.*) What was he trying on with you?

RAKITIN: He was telling me about your neighbour.

NATALIA (*sitting next to him*): Oh, that silly old thing.

RAKITIN: You've changed about him, too.

NATALIA: Today is not yesterday.

RAKITIN: It is, as far as I'm concerned, though, isn't it?

NATALIA: How do you mean?

RAKITIN (*handing her coffee*): You were unkind to me yesterday, and the same holds good today.

NATALIA : I know, my dear, I'm sorry. . . . (*Suddenly gentle.*) Whatever foolish thoughts may come into my head, there is nobody on whom I rely, as I rely on my Michel. (*Quietly.*) There is nobody in the world whom I love, as I love you. (*After a pause.*) You believe me, don't you?

VERA *begins to play on the pianoforte in the ballroom ; Chopin.*

RAKITIN : I believe you.

NATALIA : But I've come to think, my dear . . . that one can never—never really be responsible for one's actions ; one can swear to nothing. We often fail to understand the past, how can we make pledges for what is to come ? You can't put the future into chains.

RAKITIN : That's true enough.

NATALIA (*after a pause*) : Michel, I'm going to tell you something.

RAKITIN : Yes ?

NATALIA : It will hurt you, but I know it would hurt you still more if I kept it from you. . . . This young man . . .

RAKITIN : Yes ?

NATALIA : I find he is constantly in my thoughts.

A pause. The music trails away.

RAKITIN (*quietly*) : I know.

NATALIA : You know ? Michel, since when ?

RAKITIN : Yesterday. In that field. . . . If you could have seen yourself !

NATALIA : Did I look so strange ?

RAKITIN : I should never have known it was you : your cheeks were flushed, your eyes shone like diamonds. And you looked at him with an attention so trusting, so brimful of happiness, and then the happiness broke into a smile. . . . Even now, at the mere evocation your face is lighting up. . . .

NATALIA (*as he averts his eyes*) : I don't mind anything you say, Michel, so long as you don't turn away from me . . . please. . . . You're exaggerating now, you know ; he was so wildly young, in that field—I caught it from him—it went to my head, and it'll pass off just like wine, in fact, it's not worth

talking about. (*As he does not move.*) I need your help, Michel . . . don't turn away from me—please. . . .

A pause.

RAKITIN: I don't think you know yourself quite what is happening to you.

NATALIA: Don't I?

RAKITIN: One minute you say it's hardly worth discussing, the next you're asking for help. People don't ask for help unless they're desperate. You need mine?

NATALIA: Yes, I do.

He looks at her, realizing at last that his fears were well founded. A pause.

RAKITIN (*bitterly*): I see. I'm willing to live up to your expectations, Natalia Petrovna, but I must first recover my breath.

NATALIA: Recover . . . ? But—you don't think I might so far forget myself as to . . . You're not imagining—

RAKITIN: I imagine nothing. Shall we talk of something else? . . . (*After a pause.*) About Vérochka? . . . The Doctor's still waiting for your answer.

NATALIA: You're angry with me.

RAKITIN: I'm sorry for you.

NATALIA: Sorry? (*Rising, and crossing, angrily.*) Oh, Michel, this is too bad. . . . (*As he does not answer, biting her lip.*) The Doctor's waiting for my answer, did you say? But who asked him to meddle—

RAKITIN: He swore to me that you yourself had hinted—

NATALIA: Perhaps I did, I can't remember— what *does* it matter? The Doctor has so many irons in the fire, it can't be such a calamity if one of them falls out and singes his whiskers.

RAKITIN: He merely wants to know—

NATALIA: Michel, I can't bear this cold polite stare . . . please!

A pause. VERA begins to play again, in the ballroom.

I see, I made a mistake in being honest with you. You never suspected a thing, and now you're imagining Heaven knows

what. . . . (*After a pause, as he does not move, in a hard voice.*)
I shan't forget. . . . (*Ingenuously.*) Are you jealous?

RAKITIN: I have no right to be jealous, Natalia Petrovna, you know that. . . . As for the other matter, Vera's in the ballroom now—shall I tell her you wish to see her?

NATALIA: This minute? Just as you like. . . . (*As he rises to go.*) Michel, for the last time . . . you said just now you're sorry for me . . . is this the way to show it?

RAKITIN (*coldly*): Shall I tell her?

NATALIA (*angrily*): Yes, tell her, tell her. . . .

RAKITIN *goes into the ballroom.* NATALIA *stands a moment without moving.*

Even *he* doesn't understand. . . . And if I cannot turn to him, then who can. . . . My husband? My poor Arkady, I've not given you one thought, not one . . .

The music stops. She looks round, and disposes herself in the armchair. VERA comes in from the ballroom, carrying a piece of music.

VERA (*timidly*): Did you want me, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA (*starting*): Ah, Vérochka!

VERA: Do you feel quite well?

NATALIA: Perfectly, it's a little close, that's all. Vera, I want to have a little talk with you.

VERA (*anxiously, putting down her music*): Oh?—

NATALIA: A serious talk. Sit down, my dear, will you? (*As VERA obeys.*) Now . . . Vera, one thinks of you as still a child; but it's high time to give a thought to your future. You're an orphan, and not a rich one at that: sooner or later you are bound to tire of living on somebody else's property. Now how would you like suddenly to have control of your very own house?

VERA: I'm afraid I—I don't follow you, Natalia Petrovna—

NATALIA: You are being sought in marriage.

VERA *stares at her. A pause.*

You didn't expect this? I must confess I didn't either; you are still so young. I refuse to press you in the slightest—but

I thought it my duty to let you know. (*As VERA suddenly covers her face with her hands.*) Vera! My dear . . . What is it? (*Taking her hands.*) But you're shaking like a leaf!

VERA: Natalia Petrovna, I'm in your power. . . .

NATALIA: In my power? Vera, what do you take me for? (*Cajoling, as VERA kisses her hands.*) In my power, indeed—will you please take that back, this minute? I command you! (*As VERA smiles through her tears.*) That's better. . . . (*Putting an arm round her, and drawing her nearer.*) Vera, my child, I tell you what—you'll make believe I'm your elder sister—and we'll straighten out these strange things together—what do you say?

VERA: If you would like me to—yes——

NATALIA: Good. . . . Move closer—that's better. . . . First of all—as you're my sister, this is your home; so there's no possible question of anybody pining to be rid of you—now is that understood?

VERA (*whispering*): Yes. . . .

NATALIA: Now one fine day your sister comes to you and says 'What do you think, little one? Somebody is asking for your hand!' Well, what would be your first thought? That you're too young?

VERA: Just as you wish——

NATALIA: Now now—does a girl say 'just as you wish' to her sister?

VERA (*smiling*): Well, then, I'd just say 'I'm too young'.

NATALIA: Good; your sister would agree, the suitor would be given 'no' for an answer, fini. . . . But suppose he was a very nice gentleman with means, prepared to bide his time, in the hope that one day . . . what then?

VERA: Who is this suitor?

NATALIA: Ah, you're curious. Can't you guess?

VERA: No.

NATALIA: Bolshintsov.

VERA: Afanasy Ivanych?

NATALIA: Afanasy Ivanych. It's true he's not very young, and not wildly prepossessing——

VERA *begins to laugh, then stops and looks at NATALIA.*

VERA: You're joking. . . .

NATALIA (*after a pause, smiling*): No, but I see the matter is closed. If you had burst into tears when he was mentioned, there might have been some hope for him; but you laughed. . . . (*Rising, smiling wryly.*) The matter is closed.

VERA: I'm sorry, but you took me completely by surprise. . . . Do people still get married at his age?

NATALIA: But how old do you take him for? He's on the right side of fifty!

VERA: I suppose he is, but he has *such* a peculiar face. . . .

NATALIA: Bolshintsov, my dear, you are dead and buried, may you rest in peace. . . . It was foolish of me to forget that little girls dream of marrying for love.

VERA: But, Natalia Petrovna . . . didn't *you* marry for love?

NATALIA (*after a pause*): Yes, of course I did. . . . Eh, bien, fini! Bolshintsov, you are dismissed. . . . I must confess I never much fancied that puffy old moon-face next to your fresh young cheek. There! . . . (*Sitting again, next to VERA.*) And you're not frightened of me any more?

VERA: No, not any more—

NATALIA: Well, then, Vérochka darling, just whisper quietly in my ear . . . you don't want to marry Bolshintsov because he's too old and far from an Adonis—but is that the only reason?

VERA (*after a pause*): Natalia Petrovna, isn't it reason enough?

NATALIA: Undoubtedly, my dear . . . but you haven't answered my question.

A pause.

VERA: There's no other reason.

NATALIA: Oh . . . Of course, that puts the matter on rather a different footing.

VERA: How do you mean, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA: I realise you can never fall in *love* with Bolshintsov; but he's an excellent man. And if there is nobody else . . . Isn't there *anybody* you're fond of?

VERA: Well, there's you, and little Kolia—

NATALIA (*with a hint of impatience*): Vera, you must know

what I mean. . . . Out of the young men you've met . . . have you formed any attachment at all?

VERA: I quite like one or two, but——

NATALIA: For instance, don't I remember at the Krinitsins your dancing three times with a tall officer—what was his name——

VERA: With a long moustache? (*Smiling.*) He giggled all the time.

NATALIA: Oh . . . (*After a pause.*) What about our philosopher Rakitin?

VERA: Mihail Alexandrovich? I'm very fond of him, of course, who wouldn't be——

NATALIA: An elder brother, I see. . . . (*Suddenly.*) And the new tutor?

A pause.

VERA: Alexei Nikolaich?

NATALIA: Alexei Nikolaich.

VERA: I like him very much.

She has blushed; NATALIA is watching her narrowly.

NATALIA: He is nice, isn't he? Such a pity he's so bashful with everybody——

VERA (*innocently*): Oh, he isn't bashful with me!

NATALIA: Isn't he?

VERA: I suppose it's because we're both orphans. I think he must appear shy to you because he's afraid of you. You see, he's had no chance to know you——

NATALIA: Afraid of me? How do you know?

VERA: He told me so.

NATALIA: He told you . . .

VERA: Don't you like him, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA: He seems very kind-hearted.

VERA: Oh, he is! If you only knew. . . . (*Turning to her, enthusiastically.*) The whole of this household loves him—he's so warm, once he's got over his shyness—the other day an old beggar-woman had to be taken to hospital—do you know he carried her the whole way? And one day he picked a flower for me off a cliff—he's as nimble as a reindeer. D'you remember yesterday, when he cleared that tremendous ditch?

And he's always so good-tempered and gay——

NATALIA : That doesn't sound a bit like him—when he's with me, he——

VERA : But that's what I mean, Natalia Petrovna, it's because he doesn't know you ! I'll tell him how truly kind you are——

NATALIA (*rising, ironically*) : Thank you, my dear——

VERA : You'll soon see the difference—because he listens to what I say, though I *am* younger than he is——

NATALIA : I never knew you two were such friends. You must be careful, Vera.

VERA : Careful ?

NATALIA : I know he's a very pleasant young man, but at your age, it's not quite . . . People might think . . . (*As VERA blushes, and looks down.*) Don't be impatient, my dear, will you, if I seem to be laying down the law ? We older people regard it as our business to plague the young with our 'don't's' and 'mustn't's'. But, as you like him, and nothing more, there's no real need for me to say another word. (*Sitting next to her again.*) Is there ?

VERA (*raising her eyes, timidly*) : He . . .

NATALIA : Vera, is that the way to look at a sister ? (*Caressing her.*) If your *real* sister asked you very quietly, 'Vérochka, what *exactly* are your feelings towards So-and-so ?' . . . what would you answer ? (*As VERA looks at her, hesitating.*) Those eyes are dying to tell me something. . . .

VERA *suddenly presses her head to NATALIA'S breast.*

NATALIA *bites her lips.*

My poor Vera. . . .

VERA (*without raising her head*) : Oh dear . . . I don't know what's the matter with me. . . .

NATALIA : My poor sweet. . . . (*As VERA presses herself closer to her.*) And he . . . what of him ?

VERA : I don't know. . . .

NATALIA : Vera, what of him ?

VERA : I don't know, I tell you. . . . Sometimes I imagine . . .

NATALIA : You imagine what ?

VERA (*her face hidden*) : That I see a look in his eyes . . . as

if he thought of me—as a special person—perhaps . . . (*Disengaging herself, trying to be calm*) Oh, I don't know—

She raises her head, and sees the expression on NATALIA's face.
What's the matter, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA *is staring at her, as if she were a stranger.*

NATALIA: The matter? . . . (*Recovering.*) What did you say? Nothing—

VERA: But there *is* something the matter! (*Rising.*) I'll ring—

NATALIA: No no—don't ring . . . (*louder*) . . . please! It's passed off already. You go back to your music—and we—we'll talk another time.

VERA: You're not angry with me, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA: Not in the least. . . . I just want to be by myself.

VERA tries to take her hand; NATALIA turns away as if she had not noticed her gesture.

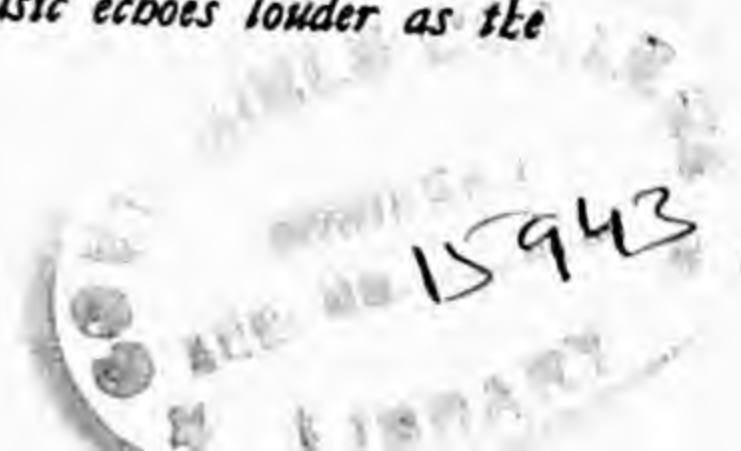
VERA (*tears in her eyes*): Natalia Petrovna . . .

NATALIA: Please. . . .

VERA goes slowly back into the ballroom. NATALIA does not move.

These children love each other. . . . Well, it's a touching idea, and may Heaven bless them both. The way she came out with it . . . and I with no idea—(*laughing feverishly*)—ha! (*Rising, vehement.*) But all is not lost—oh no. . . . (*Stopping, and collecting herself.*) But I don't know myself any more—what am I doing? (*After a pause, deliberately.*) Shall I tell you, Natalia Petrovna? You're trying to marry a poor orphan girl to a foolish fond old man—you've gone as far as to use that wily old doctor as a go-between. . . . Then there's your philosopher, and then your husband . . . what is happening—(*panic-stricken, her hands to her face*)—what is happening? (*After a pause, slowly.*) Unhappy woman, for the first time in your life . . . you are in love.

In the ballroom, VERA begins to play on the pianoforte; the same Chopin mazurka. NATALIA listens, and walks slowly and dreamily out into the garden. The music echoes louder as the CURTAIN slowly falls.



ACT II

SCENE I

The drawing-room, a few hours later ; afternoon. NATALIA is lying on the sofa, an untouched tray of food beside her. The blinds are down, and she is in a fitful sleep. A knock at the study door ; a pause ; another louder knock.

NATALIA starts and wakes.

NATALIA (calling): Come in. . . .

KATIA enters, carrying a bottle of smelling-salts ; she goes to NATALIA, who takes the bottle and sniffs it. KATIA takes the tray of food, curtseys, and goes back into the study, shutting the door behind her. NATALIA rises and goes to the French windows.

A pause.

How has it happened ? I still don't know . . . it's like—like a poison. One minute life was ordinary, the next—everything shattered and swept away. . . . He's afraid of me, the same as everybody else, and as for any qualities I possess, how could he appreciate them ? Rakitin was right, they're both stupid—how I hate that clever man ! Control yourself. . . . (*Deliberating.*) Yes, I'm very much taken with him : very much indeed. . . . (*After a pause.*) He must go away. . . . Love . . . so this is what it feels like . . . this—frightening enchantment. . . . I'll go to Arkady—yes, my sweet trusting husband—all the others are strangers, and will remain strangers. . . . But could she have made a mistake—it might be hero-worship, a sort of calf-love. I'll ask him myself. . . . (*After a pause, reproachfully.*) What is this, Natalia Petrovna, you refuse to give up hope ? And what, pray, are you hoping for ? O God, don't let me despise myself !

She hides her head in her hands. RAKITIN comes in from the garden. He is pale and disturbed. He sees her.

RAKITIN : Natalia Petrovna. . . .

He raises the blinds ; the room is flooded with sunlight. •

NATALIA (*raising her head*): Yes, who is it? (*Seeing him.*) Oh. . . .

RAKITIN: We waited for you at the picnic—Kolia and everybody were bitterly disappointed——

NATALIA: I had a bad headache. I sent a message——

RAKITIN: I've come to ask you to forgive me.

NATALIA: Forgive you?

RAKITIN: I made a fool of myself this morning. . . . You see, Natalia Petrovna, however modest a man's hopes . . . when they are suddenly snatched away, it's hard not to lose control, just for a moment. But I am myself again. (*After a pause, kneeling before her.*) Please don't turn away, as I did—I am once more the Michel you've always known, the man who asks nothing better than to be your servant—you remember what you said? (*As she sits motionless, gazing at the floor.*) 'There's nobody in the world . . . '—remember? Give me back your trust!

NATALIA (*absently*): Yes . . . (*Collecting herself.*) I'm sorry, I haven't heard a word you've been saying. . . . Michel, what is the matter with me?

RAKITIN: You are in love.

A pause.

NATALIA (*slowly*): But Michel, it's madness—can it happen so suddenly? . . . (*Brusquely.*) She loves him, you know. They love each other. . . . Michel, please—please tell me what to do!

RAKITIN: I will, on one condition: that you'll have complete faith in my disinterested wish to help you.

NATALIA: I will—I will! Michel, I'm standing on the edge of a precipice. Save me!

RAKITIN: He must go away.

A pause. She looks at him.

Right away. I won't drag in—your husband, or your duty, because such sentiments would not come well from me . . . but if these children love each other . . . imagine yourself standing between them.

NATALIA: He must go.

RAKITIN: For the sake of your happiness, both he and I . . . must go away for good.

NATALIA: You—go away too?

RAKITIN: It's the only way out.

NATALIA (*desperately*): And then—what? What shall I have to live for?

RAKITIN: But—your husband, your son. . . . What have you to live for, indeed! . . . (*As NATALIA looks away, without answering.*) Listen—I'll stay a day or two after he's gone, just to make sure that you—

NATALIA (*sombrely*): I see.

RAKITIN: You see what?

NATALIA: That you are counting on a force of habit—which you call our old friendship—bringing me close to you again—am I right?

RAKITIN: Now you are insulting me. After your promise just now . . . when all I want on earth is for your good name to shine untarnished before the world—

NATALIA: My good name? But this is something new—why have you never mentioned it before?

He shakes his head despairingly, and makes to go; she holds out her hand towards him.

Michel. . . .

RAKITIN (*taking her in his arms, overcome*): Natalia Petrovna—

NATALIA: Can anyone ever have been so unhappy . . . (*Leaning against his shoulder*) Help me, Michel—without you I am lost. . . .

YSLAEV'S VOICE: Mind you, Mamma, it's always been my firm opinion—

He enters from the hall, ANNA SEMYENOVNA on his arm.

They both see RAKITIN and NATALIA, and stop in amazement.

NATALIA turns her head, sees them, gives a distracted sob, and hurries into the study. RAKITIN stands where he is, acutely embarrassed.

ANNA: Well, upon my soul! What's the matter with Natalia Petrovna—

RAKITIN: Nothing, I tell you—really nothing—

ANNA: But my dear Mihail Alexandrovich, it couldn't be nothing! Well, upon my soul. . . . (*Making for the study.*) I'll go and ask her, point blank—

RAKITIN: No, I beg of you—

YSLAEV: But I should like to be enlightened—what's behind it all?

ANNA sits on the sofa, and glares at RAKITIN.

RAKITIN: There's nothing behind it, Arkady, I swear to you. I promise on my word of honour, that tomorrow morning I'll explain the whole thing.

YSLAEV: I—I'm right out of my depth—Natalia's never behaved like this before—it's quite fantastic—

ANNA: But she was crying! I could see the tears—and dashing out as if we were a couple of perfect strangers—

RAKITIN: Listen, dear people, both of you. Natalia Petrovna and I were in the throes of a discussion, and I must ask you—just for a moment—to leave us completely alone.

YSLAEV: Alone? But is there a secret between you?

RAKITIN: In a way, yes—but you shall know it.

YSLAEV (*after a pause*): Very well, Mamma, we'll leave them to wind up this mysterious duologue in camera—

ANNA: But what on earth—

YSLAEV: Come along, Mamma, *please* don't let it be one of your obstinate days.

RAKITIN: I beg of you to rest assured—

YSLAEV (*coldly*): I require no assurance, thank you.

ANNA: I repeat—

YSLAEV (*to ANNA, sternly*): Mamma . . .

ANNA rises, takes his arm and they both go into the ball-room. When he is sure they are out of ear-shot, RAKITIN hurries to the study door.

RAKITIN (*calling*): Natalia Petrovna. . . .

NATALIA comes back from the study; she is very pale.

NATALIA: What did they say?

RAKITIN: I said I'd explain the whole thing tomorrow, which means we have today anyway—(*as she sways, and he leads*

her to a chair)—I'll think of something—you can see now, can't you, that we cannot go on like this? I'll have a word with him presently; I feel sure somehow that he's a boy with the right instincts, and he'll see at once——

NATALIA: A word with him? But what will you say?

RAKITIN: Why, that he and I must leave here at once.

A pause.

NATALIA: Rakitin, do let us be careful.

RAKITIN: Go on.

NATALIA: Are we not being a little rash? I lost my head for a minute, and made you lose yours—and all for nothing, we may discover——

RAKITIN: For nothing?

NATALIA: I mean it! What are we doing? It seems only a moment ago that this was a house of quiet and peace—and look at us now! Really, this nonsense has gone far enough, we're going to take life up where we left off—and as for this dramatic rencontre you're planning with my husband—don't bother, because I'll tell him myself all about our little tea-cup tempest, and we'll sit back together and laugh about it.

RAKITIN: Natalia Petrovna, this is dangerous talk indeed.

NATALIA: What do you mean?

RAKITIN: You're smiling, but you're deathly pale.

NATALIA: You don't think I've changed my mind about—about the young tutor leaving? Because I propose to dismiss him myself.

RAKITIN: Yourself?

NATALIA: He must have come back with the others—send him to me, will you?

RAKITIN: Now?

NATALIA: This minute. You see, I'm so completely recovered, I know I can do it.

RAKITIN: But what will you say to him? He confessed to me himself that he's always tongue-tied with you——

NATALIA (*sharply*): You've already discussed me with him? . . . (*As he looks at her, a cold fixed look.*) I'm sorry, Michel—send him to me, there's a dear; I'll give him his

congé, and everything will be over and done with, like a bad dream.

RAKITIN: Very well.

NATALIA (*as he goes to the ballroom door*): Thank you, Michel——

RAKITIN (*turning, in an outburst*): Oh, please—at least spare me your gratitude. . . .

He controls himself and hurries into the ballroom. A pause.

NATALIA (*touched*): Michel, you're a truly generous creature. . . . But have I ever really loved you?

RAKITIN'S VOICE (*in the hall*): Monsieur Beliaev! One moment. . . .

NATALIA *starts, crosses, and sits on the sofa in readiness for the interview.*

NATALIA: One last effort, and I shall be free. Freedom and peace . . . (*shutting her eyes*) . . . how I long for you both. . . .

BELIAEV *enters from the ballroom. He comes down, inquiringly, and looks at her. A pause.*

BELIAEV: Natalia Petrovna. (*As she opens her eyes, and looks at him.*) You sent for me?

NATALIA: I should like an explanation.

BELIAEV: An explanation?

NATALIA (*without looking at him, after a pause*): I'm afraid . . . I'm dissatisfied with you.

BELIAEV (*dumbfounded*): Dissatisfied? (*As she rises and wanders restlessly.*) If I have given any impression of neglecting my duties——

NATALIA: No, no, I've been more than pleased with the way you've been handling Kolia——

BELIAEV: Then—excuse me—what——

NATALIA: Please don't take it too much to heart. You're very young, and never having lived in a strange house before, you could hardly have foreseen . . . Alexei Nikolaich, it's just this: Vérochka has made a clean breast to me of the whole thing.

She looks at him. A pause.

BELIAEV (*bewildered*): Vera Alexandrovna?

NATALIA : Yes.

BELIAEV : But . . . made a clean breast of what ?

NATALIA : You mean to say you cannot guess ?

BELIAEV : No.

NATALIA : OŁ. . . . Well, if you really don't know . . . then please forgive me—let's say no more about it. . . . (*Looking at him again, while he stares at her, still bewildered.*) Do you know that I'm not sure I believe you ? Though I understand exactly why you should pretend——

BELIAEV : I'm sorry, Natalia Petrovna, but I have not the faintest idea to what you are referring.

NATALIA : Now come, you can't pretend that you haven't noticed !

BELIAEV : Noticed what ?

NATALIA : That she is head over heels in love with you. She told me herself. . . . Well ?

BELIAEV : I . . . But—I've always behaved to Vera Alexandrovna——

NATALIA : I put the question to you as to a man of honour—what are your intentions ?

BELIAEV : My—intentions ?

NATALIA : Yes.

BELIAEV (*acutely embarrassed*) : Natalia Petrovna, this—this is a bolt from the blue.

NATALIA (*after a pause*) : I'm not doing this at all well. . . . You think I'm angry with you—don't you ? I'm not, I'm just . . . concerned—understandably, I think. Shall we sit down ?

She sits. BELIAEV hesitates, and sits next to her.

Vera loves you—oh, I know that's not your fault, I'm quite ready to believe you had nothing to do with it . . . but you see, Alexei Nikolaich, I'm directly responsible for her future. At her age such upheavals do not last long, and now that I've told you, I know I can rely on you to change *your* attitude towards her.

BELIAEV : But Natalia Petrovna . . . in what way ?

NATALIA : By avoiding her. . . . (*After a pause.*) Mind

you, when I told you all that, I took it for granted that on your side there was nothing.

BELIAEV (*perplexed*): And if there had been?

NATALIA: If there had been . . . You're not rich, but you're young, you have a future, and if two people love each other . . .

BELIAEV: But——

NATALIA (*hastily*): Oh, please don't think I'm trying to extort a confession from you. . . . I must remind you, though, that Vera was under the impression that you were not entirely indifferent to her.

A pause. BELIAEV rises, acutely perplexed.

BELIAEV: As you have been frank with me, Natalia Petrovna, may I be frank with you?

NATALIA: By all means——

BELIAEV: I have a great affection for Vera Alexandrovna, but not—anything—anything more at all . . . and if, as you say, she is under the impression that I—that I am not indifferent to her, I must tell her the truth. But having told her, it would create too painful a situation . . . and it will be impossible for me to stay on here.

NATALIA (*after a pause*): I see . . .

BELIAEV: I knew you would. . . . I need not tell you how hard it will be for me to leave your house——

NATALIA: Will it?

BELIAEV: I shall always think of you with—with the deepest gratitude. . . . (*After a pause.*) Will you excuse me for now? I shall ask the honour of taking my formal leave of you, later on——

NATALIA: Just as you wish. . . . (*As he turns to go.*) But I must confess . . .

BELIAEV: Yes?

NATALIA: I didn't expect quite this. (*Rising.*) All I intended was to remind you that Vera is still a child. I rather feel now that I've exaggerated—is it absolutely necessary for you to go?

BELIAEV: I'm sorry, but I don't see how I can stay.

NATALIA: I'm not in the habit of pressing people against their will, but I must confess to being a little displeased by this turn of events.

BELIAEV: Displeased? . . . Natalia Petrovna—(*hesitating*)—I—I'll stay.

NATALIA: Ah. . . . (*After a pause.*) You've changed your mind very quickly? (*Another pause, then spasmodically.*) Perhaps you're right, perhaps you ought to go after all.

BELIAEV: Thank you. I am at your service. (*He bows and makes to go.*)

NATALIA: One thing, though—you said you were going to explain something to Vera—I question the wisdom of that, very much.

BELIAEV: I bow to your wishes.

NATALIA (*as he goes*): As for your going away, I'll let you know this evening.

BELIAEV *inclines his head and goes out into the hall. A pause.* He does not love her! . . . Though I can't be proud of an interview that starts off dismissing him, and ends up begging him to stay. (*Going up, and sitting at the table.*) And what right had I to tell him the poor girl's madly in love with him, I who dragged the confession out of her, and in such a heartless, cruel way—not even a confession, a half-avowal—(*covering her face with her hands*)—what have I done! . . . Perhaps he was beginning to fall in love with her? If he was, what right had I to trample such a flower into the mud. . . . But have I trampled it *right* in—perhaps he was deceiving me—after all, I did my best to deceive *him*. . . . No, he's too highminded; not like me. . . . When I think how crafty I tried to be with him, and how courageously he dealt with me; he was a man, suddenly. . . . If he stays . . . I forgo any self-respect I ever had. (*Rising.*) He leaves, or Natalia Petrovna—is lost. I'll write to him—before he has time to see her—he must go!

She clasps her hands and walks swiftly up the stairs and into the hall.

QUICK CURTAIN

SCENE II

A corner of the garden, a few hours later ; evening. Fitful sunlight ; storm-clouds have gathered.

A pause. KATIA enters cautiously from the left, looks round, tiptoes quickly across and peers anxiously over to the right.

KATIA : I can't see him . . . bother ! Then why did they tell me he was coming over to the greenhouse ? I wish he'd hurry up, now's the time, while they're all at the schoolroom tea. . . . (*Sighing, sitting on the seat.*) Can it be true, this nasty tale that he's going away ? . . . (*After another sigh.*) Poor little thing . . . the way she begged and begged me ! . . . Well, the least they can ask for is a last little chat together, the sweet pets. . . . Mercy, what a hot day it's been . . . but it looks as if the rain might start any minute. . . . (*Looking out, and stepping quickly back.*) My goodness, they're not coming down here—yes they are—oh mercy me——

She runs off right, as LIZAVETA and the DOCTOR enter from the left.

THE DOCTOR : Looks like another downpour—we'll shelter in this corner—what d'you say ?

LIZAVETA : Oh—(*confused*)—I don't know, I'm sure——

THE DOCTOR : You must admit, Lizaveta Bogdanovna, that the clouds have picked the most awkward moment to gather. (*As they settle on the seat.*) Just as we were getting to a—shall I say a soulful stage ?

LIZAVETA : Soulful ? (*With downcast eyes.*) Oh, Ignaty Illyich . . .

THE DOCTOR : But now they're all over in the schoolroom, we can sit here and take up the sentimental cudgels where we left off. . . .

LIZAVETA : Cudgels—the things you think of. . . .

THE DOCTOR : Snuff ?

LIZAVETA : Well, just this once. . . .

THE DOCTOR (*as they both sniff*) : By the way, did you say the old tabby was in one of her tantrums today ?

LIZAVETA: The master's mother? I should think she is. You know what happened this afternoon, don't you—oh no I mustn't, it's scandal——

THE DOCTOR: Oh yes you must, or I'll lock you up in a cupboard——

LIZAVETA: Oh, you are a terror! Well, she walked in here and found Natalia Petrovna with her professor as she calls him, with her head on his shoulder—crying!

THE DOCTOR: Crying? You don't say. . . . But take it from me, Rakitin's not to be labelled as a dangerous customer.

LIZAVETA: How very very interesting—why, do you think?

THE DOCTOR: Much too good a conversationalist. Ordinary men may lose their heads and behave like beasts, but with those clever ones the whole thing gushes away down a waste-pipe of talk. It's the quiet ones with eyes like live coals and a broad back of the neck—the world over, that spells red for danger. . . . But shall we leave the riff-raff, bless 'em, and glance at our own affairs? Well?

LIZAVETA (*her eyes fluttering*): Well, said the echo . . .

THE DOCTOR: Would you object to my inquiring why, when one puts to you a simple question, you raise and lower your eyeballs as if you were a mechanical doll?

LIZAVETA (*rattled*): Oh—Doctor——

THE DOCTOR (*rising, and pacing*): We're neither of us chickens, and all this simpering about the bush doesn't suit us in the least. What d'you say to a down-to-earth chat, in keeping with—with the length of our teeth?

LIZAVETA: O dear.

THE DOCTOR: To start with, we like each other; and in other ways surely, we're well suited. I must, in fairness, describe myself as not exactly of high descent——

LIZAVETA (*tolerantly*): Ah, but a natural gentleman——

THE DOCTOR: But then of course you're not exactly blue blood yourself. I'm not rolling in money; if I were, I'd obviously be flying higher, but still . . . I've got a respectable enough practice; not all my patients die. . . . And I may take it, I hope, that after fifteen years, the first careless rapture

of being a governess is wearing off, and that you're also just about sick of waiting hand over fist on a female dragon, when you're not cheating at cards to make her think she's won. (*Sitting again.*) Eh?

LIZAVETA: Oh dear . . .

THE DOCTOR: Then there's me. I can't say I'm tired of being a bachelor—on the contrary, suits me to a T; but I'm not getting any younger, and my cook is robbing me. So everything fits in nicely. . . . But there's one thing, Lizaveta Bogdanovna; you don't know me. I know you, of course, backwards.

LIZAVETA (*not sure whether she is on her head or her heels.*): Oh, Doctor, really?

THE DOCTOR: Backwards. And I can't say you're entirely free from faults.

LIZAVETA (*stiffly*): Such as?

THE DOCTOR: For one thing, being a spinster for so long has turned you a little bit sour.

LIZAVETA: Oh.

THE DOCTOR: But that would right itself in a jiffy—in the moral hands of a good husband, a wife is clay. . . . But before the ting-a-ling of wedding bells, I'm more than anxious for you to know me, so you can't turn on me afterwards. I won't have any wool over your eyes—see what I mean? For example, it wouldn't surprise me if you took me for a cheerful man?

LIZAVETA: Cheerful? Oh, but of course—I've always known you were one to set the table in a roar—

THE DOCTOR: Exactly. Just because I play the fool, and tell the gentry funny stories, you label me like a shot as a sanguine character. Shall I tell you something? If those gentry weren't being damned useful to me, I wouldn't look at 'em twice. As it is, give me half a chance to poke fun at 'em to their faces without actually flicking 'em on the raw, and I'll take it. I get my own back—oh yes!

LIZAVETA: D'you include Natalia Petrovna?

THE DOCTOR (*mimicking*): 'Now Doctor, you've a tongue like a rapier, which is what I like and respect you for. . . .'

He he he, coo away, my dove, coo away! She's like all the others, that crinkle up their society faces at you in a permanent smile of hail-fellow-well-met, and all the time you can see their eyes writing the word 'peasant' flat across your phiz; say what you like, they've no use for us. And just because they drench themselves in eau-de-Cologne and drawl every syllable as if they were dropping it accidentally for you to pick up, they think you can't trip 'em by the heels. They're human just like us poor sinners, *and* what's more . . . (*with meaning*) . . . they're not saints themselves.

LIZAVETA: Ignaty Illyich, you take my breath away.

THE DOCTOR: I knew I would. Anyway, I must have proved to you that I'm not a sanguine character. Mind you, don't think because I play the fool that any of 'em has ever dared to snub me. They're even scared of me; they know I can bite. There was a big dinner once, and sitting a yard from me a landowner fellow—regular son of the soil suddenly up to his knees in filthy lucre; well, just for a joke, in front of the whole room, he took a radish and stuck it in my hair.

LIZAVETA: He didn't! Heavens, what did you do?

THE DOCTOR: Rose quietly to my full height, removed the offending vegetable from my person, bowed, and with the utmost cool courtesy challenged him to a duel.

LIZAVETA (*thrilled and shocked*): Oh! What did he do?

THE DOCTOR: Nearly had a stroke. Then in front of the whole room, the host made him ask my pardon; it had the most tremendous effect on everybody. Of course I'd known beforehand he was a martyr to gout and wouldn't fight anyway, but still . . . What I'm getting at, Lizaveta Bogdanovna, is that although I have an unconscionable amount of self-esteem, my life hasn't really come up to scratch. Nobody could call me well-read, and I'm not a good doctor—it's no use pretending I am, and if you ever fall ill, take a tip from one who knows, and don't call *me* in. . . . I'm good enough for these provincial invalids, of course, but it ends there. And now my personal habits.

LIZAVETA (*apprehensively*): Personal habits—yes?

THE DOCTOR: In my own home I am extremely morose, abnormally silent, and highly exacting. Have I made myself clear?

LIZAVETA: Yes . . . oh yes. . . .

THE DOCTOR: Though in fairness I must add that so long as my habits are observed and good hot food is served consistently before me, I keep my temper. What d'you say?

LIZAVETA: Ignaty Illyich, what can I say? Unless you've been slandering yourself on purpose——

THE DOCTOR (*rising, and pacing*): But you silly woman, I haven't been slandering myself at all! Kindly keep in mind that any other man would ha' died rather than breathe a word till after the wedding, when it'd be too late—no, I'm too proud to do that.

LIZAVETA (*looking at him*): Proud?

THE DOCTOR: Yes, you can stare as much as you like—proud. To a stranger I'd bow to the ground for a sack of flour, saying to myself, 'What a fool, my friend, how you rise to the bait . . . *how* you rise!' (*Sitting again*) But to you, Lizaveta Bogdanovna—(*taking her hand*) my future spouse . . . I say what I think. At least, I don't say *everything* I think—I must be frank—but near enough not to mislead you. Well, that's me. A funny old stick, eh?

LIZAVETA: A little—ah—eccentric, perhaps——

THE DOCTOR: One of these days I'll tell you the story of my early life, and you'll be amazed that I've come through as well as I have. . . . And now I'll give you a little time to chew the cud, what d'you say?

LIZAVETA: Oh . . .

THE DOCTOR: You shut yourself up somewhere, go carefully into the whole thing, and let me know. By the way, how old are you?

LIZAVETA (*knocked off her perch*): Oh. Thirty.

THE DOCTOR: No you're not, you're forty.

LIZAVETA (*with spirit*): No I'm not, I—I'm thirty-six.

THE DOCTOR: Well, thirty-six isn't thirty. That's another habit you'll have to get rid of, Lizaveta Bogdanovna. Anyway

a married woman of thirty-six isn't old at all. You shouldn't take snuff either. (*Rising.*) I think it's clearing up.

LIZAVETA (*rising*): Yes, it seems to have blown over, doesn't it?

THE DOCTOR: So I may expect to hear from you in a day or two?

LIZAVETA (*suddenly practical*): Tomorrow.

THE DOCTOR: Good! I like that, Lizaveta Bogdanovna—common sense, nothing like it—oh, just one more thing.

LIZAVETA (*turning*): Yes?

THE DOCTOR: I haven't kissed your hand, and I believe in these circumstances it's expected . . . (*She holds out her hand; he kisses it, while she blushes.*) That's over. . . .

She takes his arm and they go out to the left. KATIA emerges cautiously from the right.

KATIA: Mercy, what a spiteful man! And the *things* he said! . . . And now I've missed just what I came down here for. . . . (*Sitting on the seat.*) And so Lizaveta Bogdanovna will be Mrs. Medicine—(*giggling*)—oh dear, it's so funny, I'm glad I'm not in her shoes. . . . It's actually been raining over by the greenhouse . . . the grass looks as if it's had a wash. And what a lovely smell. Must be the wild cherry. (*Sentimentally.*) Oh dear. . . . Here he is! . . .

BELIAEV *appears from the left.*

(*Calling cautiously.*) Alexei Nikolaich! (*Louder.*) Alexei Nikolaich!

BELIAEV (*turning*): Yes, who wants me? (*Coming up to the seat.*) Oh, Katia, it's you!

KATIA: I want to tell you something.

BELIAEV: Tell me something? All right—(*sitting beside her.*) Ecco! D'you know, Katia, you're looking damnably pretty today?

KATIA (*blushing and giggling*): Oh go on . . .

BELIAEV: You are. (*Taking one from his pocket.*) Peach?

KATIA: No thank you, really—you have it—

BELIAEV: Did I turn down the red currants you offered me yesterday? Come on, take it—I picked it for you.

KATIA : Oh, did you ? . . . Thank you ever so much——

BELIAEV (*as she takes the peach*) : That's the style. . . . Well, what was it you wanted to whisper in my ear ?

KATIA : Oh . . . It's just that Vera Alexandrovna—that the young lady is very anxious to see you.

BELIAEV : Oh . . . (*His face falling.*) Is she ?

KATIA : She's over by the plum tree, waiting for me to fetch her—you wouldn't be disturbed down here, she said, with them all still at the birthday tea——

BELIAEV (*taken aback*) : Oh . . . I see. . . .

KATIA : She's very fond of you. (*Sighing, deeply, then going.*) I shan't be a minute—(*stopping, and turning*)—Alexei Nikolaich, is it true what they say ?

BELIAEV : What ?

KATIA : That you're leaving us ?

BELIAEV : Leaving ? I—who told you ?

KATIA : So you're not going ? (*Delighted.*) Oh, gracious Heaven be thanked ! (*Embarrassed, primly.*) We'll be back presently.

She runs off to the right. A pause.

BELIAEV : The most fantastic things are happening to me. Vera's a sweet little thing with the kindest of hearts, I'm sure, but . . . And what would be the meaning of a note like this—(*taking a scrap of paper from his pocket*)—from Natalia Petrovna ? (*Reading.*) 'Please make no decisions until I have seen you again.' What could *she* want to see me about ? . . . (*After a pause, rising.*) The stupidest thoughts will keep coming into my head. . . . Whatever it is, it's all damnably embarrassing. If somebody had told me three weeks ago that I . . . I . . . What I still can't make head or tail of, is that conversation I had with her. . . . (*Sitting again.*) Lord, I wish my heart would stop thumping like this. . . .

VERA enters from the right with KATIA ; she is very pale, and keeps her eyes averted. BELIAEV jumps up.

KATIA : Don't be frightened, miss—it'll be all right——

She hurries back to the right. A pause.

BELIAEV : Vera Alexandrovna, you wished to see me. Won't

you sit down? (*Taking her hand, leading her to the seat, and sitting beside her.*) But you've been crying!

VERA: You've been dismissed, haven't you?

BELIAEV: Who told you?

VERA: Natalia Petrovna herself. I had to talk to you, to—ask your pardon.

BELIAEV: Pardon? But what for?

VERA: If you only knew how this has upset me, Alexei Nikolaich—to be the cause of the whole thing—(*starting to cry, then controlling herself.*)

BELIAEV: You the cause of it? But Vera Alexandrovna, nothing's settled, I assure you. It's quite possible I shall stay——

VERA: No, everything's settled, Alexei Nikolaich—everything's over. When you think how you are with me now, and only yesterday, in the garden . . . do you remember?

A pause. She fights back her tears, rises, then turns to him.
Alexei Nikolaich, is it true that you weren't exactly dismissed—that it was you who were anxious to go?

BELIAEV: Why?

VERA: Answer me!

BELIAEV: I—yes. You were right. She told me everything.

VERA (*faintly*): That I . . . was in love with you?

BELIAEV (*stammering*): Yes.

VERA (*quickly*): It isn't true!

BELIAEV: But . . . if it isn't true . . . why should she——

VERA: At least—I didn't tell her—I don't remember. . . .
(*Her hands to her face.*) Oh, how cruel of her. . . . And is that why you wanted to leave?

BELIAEV: I ask you, Vera Alexandrovna, what else could I have done. . . . (*He walks away in despair.*)

VERA: He doesn't love me. . . .

She shakes her head, and covers her face again with her hands.

He sits beside her.

BELIAEV: Vera Alexandrovna, please . . . Give me your hand. . . . (*Taking it.*) I do love you, Vérochka, because it's impossible not to——

VERA : You . . . you mean——

BELIAEV : In the same way I love my sister—(*as she turns away*). I'm sorry—oh lord, I've never in my life been in a situation like this . . . I'd do anything rather than hurt you. . . . (*With resolution.*) The best thing is not to pretend anything to you at all, don't you think so?

VERA : Yes yes——

BELIAEV : Well, I know that you—you've grown fond of me. But you see, Vérochka, I'm just twenty-one, and haven't a farthing to bless myself with—— (*As VERA stifles a sob.*) I—oh lord, I don't know what to say to you——

VERA : But I haven't asked you to say anything—and suddenly to bring up your prospects—oh, it's so cruel——

BELIAEV : I'm sorry, Vérochka——

VERA : It isn't your fault, Alexei Nikolaich. I don't even blame her; she just lost her head.

BELIAEV (*puzzled*) : Lost her head?

A pause.

VERA : Yes. I'm not the only one who's given herself away. (*Turning to him.*) She's in love with you.

BELIAEV (*after a pause, thinking he has not heard right*) : What did you say?

VERA : She's in love with you.

BELIAEV : Natalia Petrovna? . . . (*Staggered.*) What—do you know what you're saying?

VERA : Yes. You see, today has made me years older. . . . And she took it into her head to be jealous of me—*me*!

BELIAEV : I don't believe it.

VERA : Then why did she suddenly try and palm me off on to that old gentleman? If you could have seen her when I broke down and—and confessed . . . her face changed before my eyes. Yes, she's in love with you. . . .

BELIAEV (*after a pause*) : I still think you've made a mistake.

VERA (*wearily*) : I haven't, I haven't. . . what have I ever done to her to torment me like that, unless it's to make her jealous? And now she's dismissed you, because she imagines that you and I . . . (*Hiding her head again.*)

BELIAEV : But she hasn't even dismissed me, I've told you. Nothing at all is settled, yet.

VERA (*raising her head and looking at him*) : Nothing at all ?

BELIAEV : Nothing. . . . Why are you looking at me like that ?

NATALIA enters from the left ; she sees them both, and stops. They have not seen her.

VERA : Because it's all perfectly clear to me now. She's come to her senses, and realised that she has nothing to fear from a gawky schoolgirl. And anyway perhaps *you're* in love with *her*.

BELIAEV : I ?

VERA : You've turned quite red.

BELIAEV : Have I ?

VERA : *Are you in love with her ? Or may you be, in time ?* (*After a pause.*) You don't answer me.

BELIAEV : But what do you expect me to say——

VERA (*turning away*) : Oh, please stop talking to me as if I were five years old ! And you *will* console me—I just can't bear it——

She rises, makes to go out to the left, and finds herself face to face with NATALIA. BELIAEV turns, and springs to his feet. A pause. NATALIA comes forward, slowly ; she is outwardly composed and icily dignified.

NATALIA : I'm sorry to see, Vérochka, that you're becoming very headstrong. I've reminded you more than once—and you too, sir, appear to have forgotten that you gave me your word You have deceived me. Vérochka, I'm just a little cross with you——

VERA : Don't you think it's time you dropped all this as well ?

NATALIA looks at her in amazement.

NATALIA : What do you mean ?

VERA : I mean this talking to me as if I were still a child. From today on, I'm a woman . . . a woman like yourself.

NATALIA (*quickly*) : Vera——

VERA: He hasn't deceived you; he doesn't love me, you know. So you've no reason in the world to be jealous of me.

NATALIA (*shocked*): Vera!

VERA: And will you please not throw any more dust in my eyes, because it just won't be any good. . . . For the simple reason I'm no longer your ward, watched over by a tolerant and mocking elder sister—I'm your rival!

A pause.

NATALIA: You forget yourself.

VERA: And if I do, who is to blame? I dare talk to you like this, because I've nothing to hope for any more—you've seen to that. . . . But I'm not going to pretend with you, as you did with me. I've told him.

A pause.

NATALIA: Told him—what?

VERA: Something I noticed. You hoped to worm everything out of me without giving anything away about yourself, didn't you?

NATALIA: Vera—I entreat you—you don't know what you're saying—

VERA: Then will you tell me I'm dreaming? That you don't love him? After all, he's made it perfectly plain that he doesn't love me. . . .

She bursts into tears and stumbles out to the left. A pause.

It begins to grow dark. BELIAEV makes to go, then turns.

BELIAEV: Natalia Petrovna, is it any good my assuring you . . . (*He shakes his head, and makes to go again.*)

NATALIA: She was right, it's no good my pretending any more. The only possible way in which I can hope to regain your respect—and my own—is to be perfectly frank. Besides, as we shall never see each other again . . . this is the last time I shall ever speak to you. (*Going to him.*) She was telling the truth. I love you.

A pause.

BELIAEV: You . . . Natalia Petrovna . . .

NATALIA (*with a strained and deliberate calm*): From the very

first day, I loved you ; though it was only yesterday that I was fully aware of it.

BELIAEV (*almost in a whisper*): Natalia Petrovna . . .

NATALIA (*crossing quickly*): One thing—please understand that it is pride, and pride only, that gives me the courage to tell you this ; the farce of pretending revolted me to the marrow—(*sitting*)—and I have been desperately anxious to wipe from your mind this picture of a tyrannical, cunning creature—anxious that the memory of me which you take away, shall not be . . . too vile. . . . I was jealous of her and I took advantage of my authority—it was all despicably unworthy of me, and we'll leave it at that. I have only one excuse, that I was in the power of something I knew nothing of. (*After a pause, with more emotion.*) You have nothing to say. . . . But then I do understand why, I do : for a man to have to listen to a declaration of love from a woman to whom he is indifferent—there can be nothing more painful, I am even grateful for your silence. You must feel intensely uncomfortable even in my presence—you have my permission to leave it at once, without formality. . . . It seems that we two were never destined to know each other. Goodbye for ever.

A pause. BELIAEV tries to say something, fails, bows, makes to go, then turns.

NATALIA : Well ?

BELIAEV : I can't go.

A pause.

NATALIA : You . . . can't go ?

BELIAEV : Not like this—how can I—how can I ? . . . (*Controlling himself.*) Natalia Petrovna . . . I—I—oh God, why can't I find the words to say it. . . . I'm sorry, I don't know how to talk to women. . . . She was right, you know, I was afraid of you—and still am. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I looked upon you as a creature from another planet—a truly heavenly being . . . and yet, when you said—

NATALIA (*softly*): Go on.

BELIAEV : When you told me that you . . . love me . . . (*Sitting beside her with an exultant cry.*) Natalia Petrovna, you

love me ! I can hear my heart beating, as I've never heard it before. . . . (*With sudden feverish decision.*) I cannot go away like this.

NATALIA (*as if to herself*): What have I done ? (*After a pause, recovering.*) I'm glad you told me all that, because it makes it clear that it was nothing in me personally which repelled you, only my position . . . I'm glad—it makes the parting easier.

A pause. He rises.

BELIAEV : It was madness just now, when I said ' I can't go ', of course I must go. . . . But you can have no idea of what is going on in my breast. . . . I am seeing you for the first time, hearing your voice for the first time. . . . (*He sits next to her ; they look into each other's eyes.*) Yes, I must go . . . if I don't, I—I can't answer for what might happen.

NATALIA : Yes, you must go. . . . But can it be, that in spite of the way I've behaved, you still think of me . . . in such a way ? If I'd known, I would have died rather than confess to you what I did——

BELIAEV : This time yesterday I myself could never have imagined—it was only just now, when suddenly——

NATALIA : Yes ? (*Her eyes shining with happiness.*) Suddenly——

BELIAEV : It was as if a hand were laid gently on my heart, a warm hand that pressed and pressed, until there was a burning in me that would scorch up my whole being. . . .

NATALIA (*her eyes closed*): We have no right to forget that tomorrow you are leaving. That we are speaking to each other for the last time.

BELIAEV : Yes, the last time. And whatever happens, one memory will stay with me for ever, how Natalia Petrovna came to love me. . . .

NATALIA : But you told me just now that you were still afraid of me. . . . (*She looks into his eyes ; her smile fades, she shudders, and puts her hand to her eyes.*) But what am I saying. . . . (*Recovering, trying to be practical.*) Alexei Nikolaich, listen . . . I've no more strength to fight, and I count on your help.

(*Rapidly, convincing herself.*) It is for the best that all should end quickly, now; we have at least grown in this minute to know each other. Give me your hand, and goodbye.

He takes her hand.

BELIAEV: I am parting from you, Natalia Petrovna, and my heart is so full that I have not a word to say. May Heaven give you—give you . . .

He breaks off, overcome, and presses her hand to his lips.

(*In a stifled whisper.*) Goodbye—

RAKITIN *appears from the left, and sees them.*

NATALIA: If you stay, my love . . . then Heaven must be our judge. . . .

BELIAEV: Natalia . . .

RAKITIN: Natalia Petrovna.

The others start, and look round at him. BELIAEV bows, intensely embarrassed, and hurries awkwardly out to the right.

RAKITIN: I'm sorry. I was walking past, and heard your voices.

NATALIA (*collecting herself*): This seems the day for explanations, does it not? . . . Who sent you to look for me?

RAKITIN: Your husband.

NATALIA (*after a pause, rising*): Shall we go back to the schoolroom?

She makes to go past him.

RAKITIN (*anxiously*): May I ask—what decision you came to—

NATALIA: Decision? (*Affecting surprise.*) I don't understand you.

A pause. She faces his look.

RAKITIN: You don't? Then I understand everything.

NATALIA: Oh, Rakitin, there you go again, hinting and hinting, really you are provoking! He and I thrashed the whole silly matter out, and anything you've ever discussed with me, is dead and forgotten. Puerile nonsense. Do you hear?

RAKITIN: But I haven't said a word, Natalia Petrovna.

Except that I understand everything. How annoyed you must be with yourself.

NATALIA: What for?

RAKITIN: For your frankness to me this morning.

She tries to turn away, hesitates, then looks at him.

NATALIA (*uncertainly*): Michel . . . you haven't yet spoken to him?

RAKITIN: Your husband?

NATALIA (*in an outburst, sitting on the seat*): Please don't go on saying 'your husband', if his name's Arkady, then call him Arkady!

RAKITIN: I haven't yet had time to prepare my speech to him.

NATALIA: Oh, what a wretched business—it makes me positively ashamed that you should have to intrigue——

RAKITIN (*coldly*): Please don't lose any sleep over that. . . . A pity, though, that the young gentleman should turn out such a novice.

NATALIA: Novice?

RAKITIN: Taking to his heels like that; I've never seen a man quite so bursting with guilt. Give him time, though, and he'll soon pick up the rudiments. . . . Shall we go?

YSLAEV appears from the left, followed by the DOCTOR.

YSLAEV: You saw him go down this path, did you say?

THE DOCTOR: I certainly thought I did——

NATALIA draws back. YSLAEV sees RAKITIN.

YSLAEV: Ah, you were right, my dear fellow—(*seeing NATALIA*). Oh . . . (*After a pause, with forced conviviality.*) You're not still on this morning's talk, are you?

NATALIA: More or less, yes. . . .

YSLAEV: It must be of world-shaking importance——

NATALIA: Oh, it is, cataclysmic!

YSLAEV (*after a pause*): Tea's ready in the schoolroom. Shall we go across?

NATALIA (*rising, briskly, and taking his arm*): What a good idea. . . .

YSLAEV (*looking round*): You know, Doctor, I was just

looking at that schoolroom; when our Kolia grows up—to the credit of both his parents, one hopes—we've only got to set up a partition, and we'll have two gardeners' bedrooms—what d'you say?

THE DOCTOR: An excellent idea, first-rate——

YSLAEV crosses, NATALIA on his arm; he has not looked once at RAKITIN. He turns round.

YSLAEV: Well, gentlemen? A cup of tea?

He and NATALIA go out to the left.

THE DOCTOR (*to RAKITIN*): Will you grant me the honour of taking your arm? (*As they start to go.*) It looks as if you and I are fated always to bring up the rear . . . ha!

RAKITIN (*in a sudden burst of temper*): Allow me to inform you, Doctor, how much you get on my nerves!

A pause. The DOCTOR, looks at him, startled, then recovers.

THE DOCTOR: If you only knew, my friend, how much I get on my own.

They follow the others out to the left.

QUICK CURTAIN

SCENE III

The drawing-room, the next morning. Early sunlight.

YSLAEV is seated at the desk, looking through papers. A pause. He begins to think, puts down the papers, then makes an effort to work again. He shakes his head, rises, pulls a bell rope and walks to the windows.

MATVEI enters from the study, carrying a duster.

MATVEI: You rang, sir?

YSLAEV: Yes—er—send the bailiff to me, will you——

MATVEI: Very good, sir. (*Going, then remembering something.*)

Oh, excuse me, sir——

YSLAEV: Yes?

MATVEI: The workmen digging at the dam . . .

YSLAEV : What about them ?

MATVEI : They're waiting to know what they are to do now.

YSLAEV : Oh. Tell them I shan't be a moment—say I've been delayed. . . .

MATVEI : Very good, sir.

YSLAEV (*as MATVEI bows and makes to go back*) : Is Monsieur Rakitin in the house ?

MATVEI : I just saw him in the billiard-room, sir.

YSLAEV (*sitting back at the desk*) : Ask him if he would be so good as to take a glass of wine with me in here.

MATVEI (*after a slight pause*) : Yes, sir.

He bows and goes into the ballroom, nearly running into ANNA SEMYENOVNA as she enters from the hall ; she is in breakfast toilette and carries a cup of chocolate and a card-box. She is in a genuine state of agitation, but appears determined to let everyone know it. She looks at YSLAEV, who does not stir. She moves across and deposits the card-box on the table ; he looks up quickly, sees her and goes back to his papers. She sighs explosively, and sits on the stool ; he still pays no attention to her.

ANNA : Arkasha. . . .

YSLAEV (*turning*) : Oh, Mamma—I didn't see you. . . . (*Rising, crossing, and kissing her on the brow, mechanically.*) How are we this morning ?

ANNA (*her voice quavering*) : Well, the Lord be thanked.

YSLAEV (*briskly*) : Good.

He returns to his papers.

ANNA (*with a deep sigh*) : As well as can be expected. . . . Matters might be worse. . . .

Seeing that he takes no notice she draws a deeper breath, almost a sob. He turns to her.

YSLAEV : Were you sighing, Mamma ?

ANNA : Arkady Serghcich Yslaev, I am your mother.

YSLAEV (*back to his papers*) : Really, Mamma, that's no news to me——

ANNA : You're a great big man, Arkasha, grown up to

Adam's estate—but I am the one who dangled you on my knee. It's a wonderful word, 'mother'.

YSLAEV: Mamma, do please explain what you're hinting at——

ANNA: My dear, you know perfectly well. Arkasha, you married an excellent wife——

YSLAEV (*drily*): Did I? Good. . . .

ANNA: Whose conduct up till *now* has been beyond reproach——

YSLAEV: You mean that Rakitin——

ANNA (*shocked*): No no—God forbid—I don't mean that at all—no no——

YSLAEV: Do let me finish, Mamma. . . . You mean that her relationship with Rakitin is not quite—as straightforward as it might be?

ANNA: Yes, I do. Arkady, has he given you any idea at all what those tears and those talks were about?

YSLAEV: I haven't asked him. (*Back to his papers.*) And he seems in no hurry to satisfy my curiosity.

ANNA: Then what d'you intend to do now?

YSLAEV: Nothing.

ANNA: Nothing? . . . *Well!* Of course, you're the master—and who am I to advise you, at your age; I'm only your mother, it's your bed, and you must lie on it. . . . (*After a pause.*) What I meant was, I should be only too pleased to clear the air with a little chat with them both——

YSLAEV (*rising, perturbed*): Mamma, you'll do nothing of the sort—I mean—I can't have you worried. Now d'you promise me, faithfully?

ANNA: You can't say I haven't cautioned you; from now on I shan't lift a finger, I'll be like an oyster. Not another syllable.

A pause. He sits again.

YSLAEV: Are you driving out anywhere today——

ANNA: Still, I *must* give you one word of warning. True friends get scarcer every day, and my baby's too trusting, my baby judges everybody else by himself.

YSLAEV : Your baby's more than able to deal with his own life, Mamma——

ANNA : Ah well, an old woman like me—I'm probably out of my mind anyway, old women go out of their minds. . . .
(*Rising.*) Then I was brought up on rather different principles, but of course all that's old-fashioned now. You go on working, I shan't lift a finger. . . . (*At the steps.*) I'll just turn into an oyster.

She goes into the hall. A pause.

YSLAEV : When you have an open wound, what makes people who really wish you well, prod into it first one finger, and then another?

He holds his head, rises, crosses and pours out two glasses of wine. RAKITIN comes in from the ballroom ; he is very much on the defensive.

Ah good morning, Mihail Alexandrovich—a glass of wine?

RAKITIN : Thank you. . . .

They toast each other. A pause. YSLAEV sits on the sofa.

YSLAEV (*smiling*) : Michel, haven't you forgotten something?

RAKITIN : I?

YSLAEV : Your promise?

RAKITIN : My promise?

YSLAEV (*charging on*) : You remember—when Mother and I came in here—Natasha in tears—something about a secret—you remember?

RAKITIN : Can I have used the word 'secret'? (*Sitting beside him.*) We had a talk, that was all——

YSLAEV : Michel, I can't bear to see you having to act such a shifty part. We've known each other since we were boys together—I've no talent for subterfuge, and you've never been anything but above-board with me. Will you allow me one question, if I give you my word that I shan't doubt the sincerity of your answer?

RAKITIN : Go on.

YSLAEV : Do you love my wife?

A pause. They look at each other.

I must make myself absolutely clear. Do you love her—with



the sort of affection which it is hard to confess to her husband?

RAKITIN (*after a pause, quietly*): Yes, Arkady, I do.

A pause.

YSLAEV (*taking his hand*): Michel, your frankness does credit to the man of honour I have always known.

RAKITIN: Thank you.

YSLAEV: But the immediate problem is—what are we to do? (*Walking up and down.*) I know Natasha, the range of her qualities—but I know the range of my own too, and I can't compete with you there, Michel——

RAKITIN: My dear friend——

YSLAEV: No no, I'm not in your class. You're brainier in every way, and immeasurably better company: there's no getting away from it, I'm a dull stick. I think Natasha's fond of me, but she's got eyes in her head—she was bound to be taken with you, I always appreciated that. . . . But I've always trusted you both, and so long as—er—nothing definite happened—oh, I wish I had your gift of the gab. . . . But after us coming upon you yesterday—what *are* we to do? I'm a simple sort of fellow, but I've enough horse sense to realize that nobody should have the power to ruin other people's lives, and that there are times when to insist on one's rights, would be wicked. And I'm not saying that because I've read it somewhere—I've got it out of my conscience; freedom—every single soul should be free, that's always been my idea. Only this does need thinking over.

RAKITIN: I've already thought it over.

YSLAEV: You have?

RAKITIN: I'm leaving.

YSLAEV: Leaving? (*After a pause.*) You think you should? For good, you mean?

RAKITIN: For good.

YSLAEV: That's—a big step to take, Michel. . . . Perhaps you're right. There's no doubt that you—my very good friend—have become a menace to me. And when I said that just now about freedom, perhaps I was forgetting my own feelings, if she—you see, for me to be without Natasha, would be like

being without . . . without . . . And then again, if your going away were to cure this unrest of hers—I haven't been imagining all that, have I?

RAKITIN (*bitterly*): No, you haven't indeed. . . .

MATVEI *enters from the hall.*

MATVEI: Excuse me, sir, the bailiff is here.

YSLAEV: I shan't be a moment. (*As MATVEI bows and goes back.*) Michel, we'll miss you sorely, of course—you wouldn't be away long? That would be carrying things too far—

RAKITIN: I don't know—quite a time, I think—

YSLAEV: Now you're not going to turn me into Othello, are you? . . . Upon my soul, I don't think there can have ever been such a conversation between two friends, since the world began! (*Putting out his hand.*) We can't part like this—

RAKITIN (*taking his hand*): Will you let me know when I may come back?

YSLAEV: But which of our neighbours is going to take your place in our hearts? Poor old Bolshintsov?

RAKITIN (*lightly*): There's—there's the new tutor, of course.

YSLAEV: The new tutor? Oh, a nice boy, but one can't mention him in the same breath with you.

RAKITIN (*sardonically*): Oh, d'you think so?

A knock at the ballroom door.

YSLAEV (*calling*): Just a minute! (*To RAKITIN, hurriedly.*) We take it as settled, then, my dear friend, that you're going away—just for a time—no hurry, you know, no hurry. . . . Well, you've taken a weight off my mind. . . . (*Moved.*) My dear boy, God bless you. . . .

He embraces RAKITIN impetuously, on both cheeks.

YSLAEV (*calling*): Come in!

BELIAEV *enters from the ballroom. He looks smarter; his customary shyness can hardly hide glimpses of an excited buoyancy. He carries papers.*

Ah, it's you—

BELIAEV: I'm sorry, sir, I've made up Kolia's report, I hope I'm not interrupting—

YSLAEV: Not at all. . . . Well, gentlemen, the devil finds

work for idle hands, et cetera, I haven't looked at the dam this morning, this will never do. (*Taking his papers under his arm.*) We shall meet again—(*calling*)—ready, Matvei! Matvei! All right. . . .

He goes out into the hall. BELIAEV crosses to desk and arrays his papers.

BELIAEV: How are you today, Mihail Alexandrovich?

RAKITIN: Surely that's a new coat you have on? And a buttonhole? . . .

BELIAEV (*blushing, and starting to pluck it out*): Oh—if it's too much——

RAKITIN: But why, it's charming! . . . (*After a pause.*) In case you want any messages run, I'm going into the town tomorrow, en route for Moscow.

BELIAEV (*turning*): Moscow? Tomorrow?

RAKITIN: A matter of business has cropped up.

BELIAEV: Will you be away long?

RAKITIN: Possibly quite a time.

BELIAEV: May I ask—does Natalia Petrovna know?

RAKITIN: No, she doesn't. Why do you ask?

BELIAEV (*somewhat embarrassed*): No particular reason.

RAKITIN: I don't see anybody else in the room?

BELIAEV (*turning round to him*): What?—no, there isn't—why——

RAKITIN: I thought there must be, for us to be acting such a farce. (*As BELIAEV rises.*) You mean to say you can't guess why I'm going away?

BELIAEV (*on the defensive*): No, I can't.

RAKITIN: Oh . . . well, I'll believe you. . . . Just before you came in then, Arkady Sergheich and I had rather an important talk, man to man, as a result of which I have decided to take my departure: the reason being that he fancied me to be in love with his wife.

BELIAEV (*after a pause, stiffly*): Indeed. . . .

RAKITIN: Now what would you do in my place? (*After a pause.*) His suspicions were totally unfounded, of course, but it didn't prevent him being tormented by them, and I felt that

for a friend's peace of mind, an honourable man must be prepared to sacrifice his own—his own happiness. That is why I am going away. (*With meaning.*) If you were in my place . . . you'd do the same, wouldn't you? You'd go away?

BELIAEV (*after a pause*): I suppose I would, yes. . . .

RAKITIN: I'm delighted to hear it. Of course, there's a funny side to my decamping—it implies that I regard myself as a menace. But I feel that a woman's good name . . . Besides, haven't you known women, innocent of heart and pure as snow—real children in spite of their intelligence—who by very reason of that lack of guile, were the more apt to yield to a sudden infatuation? . . . (*Suddenly.*) After all that, do you still look upon love as the greatest blessing on earth?

BELIAEV (*with a non-committal laugh*): Not having yet fallen a victim, I'm not in a position to say . . . but I've always understood that to love a woman, and be loved in return, is the—er—the nearest a man can reach to perfect happiness.

RAKITIN: Long may you be soothed by such pleasant lullabies! . . . Shall I tell you what I think?

BELIAEV: Do.

RAKITIN: Just this. Once you surrender to it, all love—spurned or returned—becomes a calamity. Mark my words, my friend . . . the day will come for you to know just how those flower-like hands can torture, with what exquisite care they can tear your heart to shreds; the day will come for you to discover what a world of hate can smoulder underneath the most ardent passion. When you find yourself longing for peace of mind as a sick man pines for health—for any insipid everyday peace—think of me; when you stand shackled to a woman's apron-string, and watch yourself envying, from the bottom of an agonised heart, every carefree stranger on the highway, while the shame of your own slavery seeps into your vitals—the slavery of paying the highest price for the most miserable returns . . . think of me.

A pause. BELIAEV watches him, fascinated.
(*Collecting himself.*) I mean, think of what I've just said—I was . . . philosophizing.

BELIAEV (*soberly*): With no motive?

RAKITIN (*drily*): Exactly. . . . So you don't want anything in the town?

BELIAEV: Nothing, thank you. (*Rising.*) May I say how sorry I am you are going?

NATALIA *is seen walking in the garden from the right, and stands in the French windows; she is followed by VERA, who looks pale and woebegone.*

RAKITIN (*without seeing them.*) May I say, quite sincerely, how glad I am to have made your acquaintance?

They shake hands. NATALIA watches them.

NATALIA (*too lively*): Well, gentlemen what has your programme been this morning?

RAKITIN (*starting*): Oh, good day—nothing very exciting so far—

NATALIA (*coming in, followed by VERA, as BELIAEV bows, embarrassed*): Vera and I have been in the garden for hours—it's quite heavenly out of doors today. I love the smell of lime-trees, don't you? (*Sitting.*) We walked under them for ages, listening to the bees humming, it was perfect.

BELIAEV: No. (*Lamely.*) I wasn't—

RAKITIN (*jauntily, to NATALIA*): So today it's your turn to pay tribute to the beauties of Nature? (*After an awkward pause.*) As a matter of fact, Alexei Nikolaich here couldn't risk the garden this morning, as he's sporting a new coat, hadn't you noticed?

BELIAEV (*stung*): You mean that as it must be the only one I have, I couldn't have risked spoiling it?

RAKITIN (*confused*): Of course not. I was joking.

An awkward pause. VERA sits and takes up some sewing.
(*Nonchalantly.*) Oh, Natalia Petrovna—I knew there was something—it nearly slipped my mind. I'm leaving today.

NATALIA (*staring at him*): Leaving?

RAKITIN: I'm going to Moscow, on business.

NATALIA (*after a pause*): Well, hurry back, won't you. . . .
(*To BELIAEV, suddenly.*) Alexei Nikolaich, were those your drawings Kolia was showing me?

BELIAEV (*rising*): Oh—they're nothing much. . . .

NATALIA: Nothing much, but they're charming! You have a distinct flair. . . .

RAKITIN (*as BELIAEV bows*): I observe that every day you discover new virtues in Monsieur Beliaev.

NATALIA: Do I? (*Coldly.*) I'm so glad. . . .

RAKITIN (*who has for the last few moments been on the rack*): Well, I must prepare for my journey—(*going*)—au revoir for the present—

NATALIA (*calling after him*): You'll come and say goodbye, won't you—it won't slip your mind?

RAKITIN: No. It won't slip my mind.

BELIAEV (*suddenly, as RAKITIN bows*): Mihail Alexandrovich, may I come and have a word with you?

RAKITIN: Certainly—by all means—

He goes out into the ballroom. BELIAEV bows awkwardly and follows him.

NATALIA: Vera, don't be like this with me. . . . (*As VERA does not respond in any way, rising impetuously, going to her and kneeling, entreating, as VERA covers her face with her hands*, No, Vérochka—it's all my fault—

VERA (*through her sobs*): Don't kneel to me—I can't bear you to kneel to me—

NATALIA: I shall kneel to you until you say I'm forgiven. . . . My dear, I know how hard it is for you, but is it any easier for me? The difference between us is that you've done nothing wrong to me, while I—

VERA (*in a hard voice*): There's another difference, Natalia Petrovna, that you haven't noticed. Today I find you gentle, and kind—

NATALIA: And do you know why? Because I realize how wicked I've been—

VERA (*suddenly*): You are gentle and kind today because you know that you are loved.

A pause.

NATALIA (*sombrely*): Will you believe me, when I tell you that you and I are as unfortunate as each other?

VERA : He loves you !

NATALIA : Vera, it's time we came back to reality. Do remember the position I'm in—the position we're both in. . . . When you think that our secret—entirely my fault, I know—that our secret is already known in this house by two men—Vera, instead of mortifying each other, shouldn't we be trying to rescue ourselves from an impossible situation ? Have you forgotten who I am, my position in this house ? . . . But you're not even listening to me.

VERA (*looking before her, tonelessly*) : He loves you. . . .

NATALIA : Vera, he'll be going away. . . .

VERA (*in an outburst*) : Leave me alone !

NATALIA *looks at her, undecided what to do.*

YSLAEV'S VOICE (*calling, in the study*) : Natasha, are you in the drawing-room ?

NATALIA (*calling*) : Yes ? Did you want me ?

YSLAEV'S VOICE (*calling*) : I've got something to show you—the new plans of the dam, my dear—quick !

NATALIA : Coming——

She goes into the study.

VERA : He loves her. And I have to remain in her house. . . . I can't bear it. . . .

She puts her hand to her eyes. The ballroom door opens and the DOCTOR'S head appears slowly. He looks round cautiously, and steals across the room to VERA, who does not see him. He stands with his arms folded, grinning mischievously from ear to ear.

THE DOCTOR (*suddenly*) : Boo !

VERA (*starting*) : Oh . . . Oh, Doctor, it's you. . . .

THE DOCTOR : What's the complaint this morning ? Delirium tremens, gout or St. Vitus's Dance ?

VERA : I'm all right, really, thank you. . . .

THE DOCTOR : Your pulse, young lady, stand and deliver. . . . (*Feeling her wrist.*) Hmm. . . . Vivace, very vivace, one might say galloping. . . . Now take my advice, as a professional man——

VERA (*looking at him, suddenly resolute*) : Ignaty Illyich, that gentleman, our neighbour . . . what was his name——

THE DOCTOR: Bolshintsov? Yes?

VERA: Is he really a nice man?

THE DOCTOR: A *nice man*? Young lady, there's only one word for my old Bolly—'paragon'.

VERA: Has he a temper?

THE DOCTOR: A temper? My dear, I can only tell you—he's not a man, he's a mountain of dough; you just dump him on to the kitchen table, roll up your sleeves, and . . . (*making graphic gestures of kneading a pliable mass.*)

VERA: You can answer for him?

THE DOCTOR: As I would for myself, hand on heart. . . .

VERA (*after a pause*): Then will you say . . . that I am willing to marry him.

THE DOCTOR: Willing to . . . (*With incredulous amazement.*) No! (*Springing up.*) No!!

VERA: But only if it's as soon as ever possible, do you understand?

THE DOCTOR: But tomorrow, if you like! Bravo, Vera Alexandrovna, bravo! (*Blowing ecstatic kisses to her.*) There's spirit for you. . . . He's waiting at the lodge gates—he'll have a fit—what a whirligig—have you *any* idea, Vera Alexandrovna, *how* much he worships you?

VERA (*brusquely*): We'll take that for granted, Doctor, shall we—

THE DOCTOR: All right, my sugar plum, mum's the word—I'll take the short cut—on the wings o' the wind, I fly. Au revoir—bonne chance—enchanté!

He kisses her hand tempestuously, and races out into the hall.

VERA: Anything in the world rather than stay here and watch her with him. Because she *is* happy, however much she may pretend to be wretched—the way she tried to comfort me—(*rising.*) I can't . . . bear it. . . .

BELIAEV comes in from the ballroom, and nearly runs into her.

BELIAEV (*quietly*): Vera.

She starts, and looks up at him. A pause.

VERA : Yes ?

BELIAEV : I'm glad you're by yourself. I've come to say goodbye.

VERA : To say . . . goodbye ?

BELIAEV (*as she sits*) : I've just had a talk in there with Monsieur Rakitin, a serious talk—I can't give you any idea of the sting in his voice. . . . He was right about my new coat, too—I deserved every word. Not only have I disturbed your peace of mind—I still don't know quite how—and Natalia Petrovna's . . . I've been the cause of old friendship breaking up . . . anyway, turning the heads of rich women and young girls is *not* my style. (*Sitting next to her.*) When I've gone, everything will simmer down back to normal, you'll see—you'll forget me and wonder how on earth it ever came about——

VERA : Please don't break your heart over me. I shan't be staying here long myself.

BELIAEV : You won't ? How d'you mean ?

VERA : That's my secret.

BELIAEV (*rising*) : But that's what I mean, how can I *help* leaving this house, when I seem to have started a sort of fever that makes everybody want to disappear one after the other ? Anyway, I feel acutely uncomfortable here—I keep thinking everybody's looking at me ; I don't mind telling you, Vera Alexandrovna, I'm counting the minutes till I'm up on that dog-cart, bowling along the high road. . . . It's a strange feeling, when your heart aches intolerably, and yet your head is as gay and light as if you were a sailor embarking on a long voyage beyond the seas. You know too well the perils ahead, you're sad at leaving your friends, and yet the waves call so joyously—the wind blows so fresh—that the blood starts dancing like mad through your veins. Yes, I must be off. Back to Moscow—all my old friends—I'll get straight to work——

VERA : You love her—and yet you're leaving——

BELIAEV : Can't you see, that all that's over and done with ? It flared up and it went out, like a spark. . . . Let's part friends, for Heaven's sake, shall we ? . . . (*After a pause, awk-*

wardly.) I shall never forget you, Vera—believe me, I've grown very fond of you. . . . (*Embarrassed, taking a paper from his pocket.*) Would you—would you be so kind as to give this note for me, to Natalia Petrovna?

VERA: A note?

BELIAEV: I—I don't feel able to say goodbye to her.

VERA (*taking the note*): But are you leaving straight away?

BELIAEV: This minute. I'm walking as far as Petroskoye, and waiting there for Monsieur Rakitin. You see, everything's in hand. . . . And when you give that, would you just say—no, what's the point. . . . (*Listening.*) Somebody's coming—goodbye. . . .

He hurries towards the hall, turns, looks towards the study, hesitates, and runs out into the hall. NATALIA enters from the study, and looks at VERA.

NATALIA: I heard his voice. . . . (*Seeing her expression.*) What's the matter?

VERA *hands her the note*; NATALIA *looks from it to her.*

Vera, you're frightening me. . . .

VERA: Read it.

NATALIA *opens the note, and sinks to a chair. A pause. She stares before her.*

Natalia Petrovna. . . .

NATALIA: But he said goodbye to *you*. He was able to say goodbye to *you*. . . .

VERA: Only because he doesn't love me.

NATALIA: But he can't go like this—(*rising abruptly*) he has no right—who gave him the idea of this ridiculous gesture—it's too slighting—how does he know that I wouldn't have had the courage . . . (*Sinking down again.*) What am I to do—(*in a cry*)—what am I . . .

VERA (*walking slowly to the steps*): Not a minute ago, you said yourself he would have to go . . . remember?

NATALIA: Well, he *is* going . . . and now you're glad. Because it makes us equal. . . . (*Her voice breaks in a sob.*)

ACT II A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY SCENE III

VERA (*turning*): Natalia Petrovna, you said to me just now——

NATALIA (*turning from her, almost in aversion*): I don't want to hear. . . .

VERA (*inflexibly*): You said, 'Instead of mortifying each other, shouldn't we be saving ourselves?' We're saved now.

She goes out into the hall. NATALIA recovers.

NATALIA: She was speaking the truth . . . we're saved. It's all over . . . all put beautifully to rights. . . .

YSLAEV enters from the study with papers. NATALIA rises abruptly and goes to the French windows. He crosses to the desk, then sees her.

YSLAEV (*calling*): Natasha!

NATALIA does not answer. He goes up to her.

(*Gently.*) It's me, Natasha. . . .

She turns; he takes her hand; she attempts to smile at him.

You're so pale, my dear. It worries me.

NATALIA: It's nothing, Arkady, really——

YSLAEV: Won't you lie down, my darling? Just to please me?

NATALIA: Very well. . . .

She takes a step and sways. He catches her.

YSLAEV: There, you see? (*As she leans on him.*) Shall I take you upstairs?

NATALIA (*trying to laugh*): No, really, Arkady, I'm not as bad as all that! I just want some fresh air—just for a minute. . . .

She walks into the garden. RAKITIN enters, from the ballroom.

YSLAEV: Michel, what on earth possessed you to do it, when I'd begged you to wait—she was so upset when I came in here——

RAKITIN: To do what?

YSLAEV: To tell her you're leaving like that!

A pause.

RAKITIN: You think that's what's upset her?

YSLAEV (*as NATALIA turns, and comes into the room again*): Are you going up now, my dear?

NATALIA: Yes. (*She crosses slowly towards the hall. They watch her.*)

RAKITIN: Goodbye, Natalia Petrovna.

She stands, without turning round, then begins to go again.

YSLAEV: Natasha . . . (*as she stops*) . . . may one of his old friends remind you that here is one of the best of men?

NATALIA *turns round, slowly; she looks from one to the other, as if she were dazed.*

NATALIA: Yes—he's the salt of the earth! (*With sudden vehemence.*) You're both the salt of the earth. . . . And yet . . .

She puts her hand to her eyes and stumbles out into the hall.

YSLAEV *walks to the French windows.*

RAKITIN (*to himself*): After four years of platonic devotion, what a touching farewell. Ah bien—(*viciously*)—it was high time to cut short a morbid and consumptive relationship. . . . (*As YSLAEV comes back to him.*) Goodbye, Arkady.

YSLAEV *looks at him; there are tears in his eyes.*

YSLAEV: It's not easy. You see, I didn't expect it. Like a storm on a very fine day. . . . Well, what we reap, we have sown—however, thank you for what you're doing. You are my friend.

RAKITIN (*in a frantic undertone*): This is too much. . . . (*Recovering.*) Goodbye.

He is about to hurry out into the hall when he collides with the DOCTOR coming in.

THE DOCTOR: What's happened? Somebody just said Natalia Petrovna's fainted—

YSLAEV: Nothing to worry about, Doctor, the heat, more likely than not—

THE DOCTOR: No doubt, no doubt. . . . (*To RAKITIN.*) I hear you're going away?

RAKITIN (*patiently*): Yes, on business.

THE DOCTOR (*slyly*): Ah, business . . . fancy that now. . . .

ANNA SEMYENOVNA, LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA, KOLIA
and SHAAF pour in one after the other, from the ballroom.

ANNA: What is it—what's happened—my poor dear
Natasha—for Heaven's sake—

KOLIA: Where's Mamma? Why has she fainted? What
makes a person faint? What's the matter with her?

YSLAEV: Nothing at all is the matter with her—

ANNA: But good gracious—

LIZAVETA: We were just told—

SHAAF: Dies moment hier—

} (*All at once.*)

YSLAEV (*loud, peremptory*): Quiet, all of you! . . . I've just
seen Natalia Petrovna, and I repeat, there is nothing at all the
matter with her—what's more to the point, is what's the matter
with all of you?

ANNA: Really, Arkasha, there's no need to bite all our heads
off just because we're a little concerned—pardonably, I
think—

RAKITIN: Well, I must be off.

ANNA: Oh—are you going away?

RAKITIN (*resigned to still more explanations*): Yes, I'm going
away.

ANNA (*sweeping him from head to foot, with an all-embracing all-
understanding look*): Ah . . .

*She motions LIZAVETA and SHAAF to the card-table and
begins to arrange a game.*

KOLIA: Papa, why has my new tutor gone?

YSLAEV (*as RAKITIN comes down to them*): Gone? Beliaev?
Where to?

KOLIA: I don't know. He just shook my hand, put his cap
on and went—and it's time for my lesson, the best lesson of
all—

YSLAEV: I expect you misunderstood, he'll be back in five
minutes—

RAKITIN (*aside, to YSLAEV*): I'm afraid Kolia didn't mis-
understand, Arkady. He won't be coming back.

The others are making surreptitious attempts to overhear.

YSLAEV : Now what does *this* mean ?

RAKITIN : He's going away too. To Moscow.

YSLAEV : Is everybody in this house going stark staring mad ?

RAKITIN : Between ourselves, Arkady, little Vérochka's fallen in love with him.

YSLAEV : With the tutor ? (*Whistling.*) Whew. . . .

RAKITIN : And like an honourable man, he has decided it would be only tactful to take his departure. (*As YSLAEV sits, with a gesture of bewilderment.*) So now you understand—

YSLAEV : I don't understand anything at all, and my head's going round like a top. Everybody muttering what honourable men they are, and scurrying off north south east and west, like a lot of partridges !

ANNA (*coming to them*) : Now what is all this—something about a tutor, did I hear—

YSLAEV (*holding his head, in a shout*) : Nothing, Mamma, nothing, nothing !

KOLIA : But, Papa—

YSLAEV : Monsieur Shaaf—

SHAAF (*bustling forward, with alacrity*) : Mein Herr !

YSLAEV : Would you kindly give Kolia his German lesson now—

KOLIA (*bursting into tears*) : No, I want the other tutor ! I want the other tutor—(*as SHAAF pilots him, screaming and kicking, into the ballroom*)—I want the other tutor. . . .

His voice dies away. A pause.

YSLAEV (*to RAKITIN*) : Michel, I'll come part of the way with you. I'll have Favourite saddled, and meet you at the dam. And Mamma, will you do something for me ?

ANNA : My dear, any mortal thing to help—

YSLAEV : Keep away from Natasha, will you ? And you too, Doctor, she's not at all well . . . (*Going into the study, calling.*) Matvei ! Matvei !

ANNA *sits, bristling with wounded dignity, like an old hen.*

LIZAVETA, *her eyes round with amazement, takes up her stand behind her, like a shadow.*

THE DOCTOR (*to RAKITIN, an uncontrollable twinkle in his eye*): Mihail Alexandrovich, may I have the honour of driving you as far as the main road?

RAKITIN: Driving me? Have you got a horse?

THE DOCTOR (*beaming from ear to ear*): Three horses, my dear friend, *and* a wagonette.

ANNA: What is all this—

RAKITIN (*bowing*): Anna Semyenovna.

ANNA (*majestic, without rising*): Goodbye, Mihail Alexandrovich. (*Sepulchrally.*) I wish you as pleasant a journey as can be expected.

RAKITIN: Thank you . . . Lizaveta Bogdanovna.

He bows; LIZAVETA drops a frightened curtsey. He hurries out abruptly into the hall.

THE DOCTOR (*kissing ANNA's hand*): Au revoir, honoured lady—

ANNA: Don't tell me you're going to Moscow too?

THE DOCTOR: No no, just as far as my own humble abode. My patients, you know, my patients. . . . (*To LIZAVETA.*) Dear lady . . .

LIZAVETA (*her eyes fluttering*): Doctor . . .

THE DOCTOR: Au revoir, but not goodbye.

He kisses her hand, peers to see that ANNA is not looking, winks broadly at her, and hurries out into the hall.

ANNA (*as LIZAVETA sits opposite her, with knitting*): Well, Lizaveta Bogdanovna . . . and what do you make of all this?

LIZAVETA: Anna Semyenovna, I am at a loss.

ANNA: Did you hear what I heard? That the tutor boy is leaving too?

LIZAVETA: No!

ANNA: But what is the world coming to? Ah well. . . .

LIZAVETA (*her eyes modestly downcast*): Anna Semyenovna.

ANNA: Yes, dear?

LIZAVETA: I may not be staying here much longer either. . . .

ANNA sits back, staring at her in amazement.

QUICK CURTAIN

